

FEB. 1952



DETECTIVE TALES



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THE SUSPENSE MAGAZINE



FEB.

DETECTIVE TALES

**NICELY FRAMED,
READY TO HANG!**
by **DAN GORDON**

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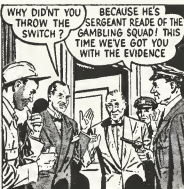
AT LAST JIM LEARNS THE SECRET THAT HAS BAFFLED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS FOR MONTHS



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LATER THAT NIGHT



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DETECTIVE TALES

VOL. FORTY-NINE

FEBRUARY, 1952

NUMBER ONE

Five Dramatic Murder Novelettes

NICELY FRAMED, READY TO HANG!.....**Dan Gordon** 14
—That was Dick Roney's position when that dead blonde stepped into the picture.

THE MAN FROM MANITOBA.....**Frank Gruber** 38
—had two strikes against him: He had too much money—and he wanted too hard to live!
(Copyright 1936 by Popular Publications, Inc.)

COME ON-A MY FUNERAL!.....**Donn Mullally** 56
—the curly-headed blonde sang to Del Olsen. "You'll meet the deadeast people!"

CASE OF THE LIMPING CORPSE.....**Winston Bouvé** 78
—took Detective Nem Parsons to the edge of the grave—in search of the dead man who refused to lie down!
(Copyright 1926 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Missing Men")

FATHER, MAY I GO OUT TO KILL?.....**Wm. Campbell Gault** 92
—she asked prettily. And where was the man who could refuse lovely Ellen Cruice anything?

Two Daring Crime Short Stories

NIGHT OF TERROR.....**Francis K. Allan** 29
—took Polly from the arms of her brand-new groom into those of Nick—who'd give her the kiss of death!

NEVER CRY COP!.....**Don James** 71
—that was the lesson Mary had to remember. Even when you needed him. Even when you loved him. . . .

Three Special Features

LETHAL LAUGHS.....**Joseph C. Stacey** 6
THE CRIME CLINIC.....**A Department** 10
ODDITIES IN CRIME.....**Jakobsson and Waggener** 55

Next Issue Published



January 18th!

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 305 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steger, President. John J. McFarish, Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright, 1951, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single Copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., 48 issues and Canada, \$1.00; other countries 50c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Valle Avenue, Kokomo, Indiana, or 305 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.



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By
JOSEPH C. STACEY

LETHAL LAUGHS

IN CHICAGO, a man smashed a window in a meat market and made off with three hams, only to learn later—very much to his chagrin—that the “hams” he’d stolen were merely realistic oil paintings of hams stuffed with sawdust—and used strictly for window display purposes!

IN SPRINGTOWN, Texas, a motorist really got angry when he collided with a telephone pole and damaged his car. Police pinched him in the act of setting the pole on fire!

IN FLINTSTONE, Georgia, an aged man readily confessed to shooting his wife to death. His motive? “I expect to die soon,” he told police, “and only wanted to save her the grief of seeing me lying dead in my basket!”

IN LOS ANGELES, after a woman registered the complaint that her spouse had struck her with a prayer book, police promptly booked him—on charges of “assault with a deadly weapon!”

IN SEATTLE, Washington, an honor student in the Police Training School was

(Continued on page 8)

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(AMORC)

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

jailed—after it was discovered that he'd been driving to classes in a stolen auto!

IN NASHVILLE, Tennessee, a deputy warden reported a most unusual prison break to police. Nobody had broken out of the state penitentiary, he explained, but some very nervy individuals had broken in, battered open the office safe, and had scrambled with \$40!

IN BOSTON, three firemen were pinched recently—for turning in seventeen false fire alarms!

IN MOSCOW, a female hotel manager was fined 100 rubles (about \$20) for pulling quite a boner. She had nailed a notice on a tree in the park near the hotel—warning her tenants that it was illegal to nail notices of any kind on the trees in the park near the hotel!

IN SEATTLE, police have come across something quite unique in the way of bank robberies. They're searching for a man who broke into the Pacific National Bank recently, not to steal money—but to loot the bank's vending machines of candy and cigarettes!

IN PROVIDENCE, somebody busted into a salesman's parked auto—and made off with twelve shrouds!

IN BALTIMORE, thieves accosted a man on the street one night—and made off with his pants. In court, the victim was fined \$2.45 on a disorderly conduct charge, after a policeman had arrested him near the scene of the crime—for being "indecently dressed!"

IN FORT WORTH, Texas, a certain thief was nabbed stealing a case of soda pop—from police headquarters!

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WILLIE, an assistant editor on our favorite detective magazine, is threatening to quit. This is a semi-annual threat with Willie, and normally none of us pays any attention to him. Perhaps, we hazarded, this is Willie's reminder that the cost of living has gone up and he'd like his pay envelope fattened a bit.

But Willie, the artistic, non-mercenary type, claims this has nothing to do with money.

Matter of fact, Willie says, murder just isn't exciting any more. "Shooting, shooting, shooting," Willie cries. "I'm sick of it. What's happened to the old-time imagination? I remember, ten-fifteen years ago, an author was a bum if he couldn't figure out a novel way of killing off his corpses. Wrapping concrete around their feet and dropping them off the Brooklyn Bridge, conscious, was mild. They used to hack the victims to bits with stilettos, and hang them with barb wire, and toss them alive into lime pits, and what not.

"Where," Willie asks plaintively, "are the good old days?"

We tried to explain things to our unhappy assistant. People today, we told him, like their murders credible. For example, who would believe a story about a woman

carving her husband up and making stew out of him for . . .

"Stop right there," Willie shouts. "Didn't you ever hear of Mrs. Sophia Xanthopoulos?"

In five minutes Willie had the clippings on our desk, and sure enough, there it was.

It happened in Salonica, Greece, and events started to unfold when a stranger walked into the restaurant of Mrs. Xanthopoulos and ordered stew. As he waited he noticed on the wall a picture of a handsome man. "Your husband?" he asked the buxom Mrs. X.

Mrs. X. sadly dried a tear that had formed in her eye. Yes, she admitted, the picture was of her beloved Constantine, who had broken her heart by deserting her.

Well, this was pretty affecting stuff, and the stranger could not be blamed for shedding a sympathetic tear or two for the unfortunate Mrs. Xanthopoulos. He didn't have time to shed more tears than these, because at that moment his fork came up from the stew with a strange object on it.

A gold tooth.

The stranger looked over to the picture on the wall. Sure enough, Mr. Xanthopoulos' smile revealed a gold tooth similar to the one on the customer's plate.

(Continued on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

The police were interested enough in this strange coincidence to take a peek into Mrs. Xanthopoulos' refrigerator, and, just as they had suspected, there was Mr. X.—or, rather, what was left of Mr. X.

"See what I mean?" Willie cries excitedly. "But you put that in a piece of fiction, and back come a hundred letters from readers. 'Impossible!' 'Incredible!' 'Ridiculous!'" Willie shakes his head sadly. "Don't people know reality when they see it?" he asks.

Willie opens his scrap book then to the famous case of the Phantom of the Attic, which took place in California some twenty-five years ago. The corpse was retired businessman Henry Haas who had moved to California from the Midwest to get his wife away from a guy named Joe. Eleven years later this guy named Joe shot and killed Henry Haas when the latter discovered him in the Haas home.

It was eight years after that before the cops caught up with Joe, but they were still interested in the case. Where, they asked Joe, had he been during that eleven years after the Haases moved out to the Coast.

Why, explained Joe, that was easy. He had been living in the Haas attic. Mrs. Haas had taken mighty good care of him there.

Joe was convicted of manslaughter, but since eight years had passed between murder and conviction, and California has a statute of limitations on manslaughter, Joe got off without serving a day.

"See what I mean?" Willie says. "What a story! It could only happen in real life. And then there's the case of Joseph Medley, who killed only redheads. . ."

Pretty good stuff, we admitted.

". . . And those thirteen corpses in Cleveland, which the police never cleared up. . ."

A lot of corpses, we allowed.

". . . And Herman Gotlieb, the Frenchman, who killed forty people with a gun built into his wooden leg. . ."

Nice going, we agreed, if you have a wooden leg to work with.

". . . And Manoel Pereira, the trapeze artist, who killed his rival with a rapier during their circus act on a high wire. . ."

Willie sighs mournfully. "I could go on like this all day, but it's no use. There's just no fun in murder any more." Reluc-



tantly he closes his scrap book and picks up some proofs. There's silence for a few moments. Then. . .

"Say," says Willie, "I see we got a story by Bill Gault in this issue!"

A few minutes later: "Boy! A Dan Gordon yarn! That Gordon is all right, for my money."

And still later: "Donn Mullally, eh? You know, that guy's got something."

And: "Good old Francis Allan! Hotter'n a pistol."

There's a long pause then. Finally Willie raises his head. "You know what?" he says. "I think I'm going to hang around a while, after all. Maybe there's still some excitement in this murder business."

Could be, we agreed. And if Willie's still around to help us—and we think he will be—we'll see you in the next issue of good old DETECTIVE TALES on January 18th—*The Editor.*

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It
Shows
Most

REDUCE

MOST ANY
PART OF
THE
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A black and white illustration of a man in a tuxedo and bow tie, looking out from a doorway. He is holding the door frame with his right hand. The background is dark and textured. The man has a serious expression.

NICELY

By
**DAN
GORDON**

●

She was the loveliest
corpse money could buy,
and they draped her right
around Roney's neck, as a
little present from the
boys!

●

"It was Mr. Roney," she said.
"I looked in and saw him fire
the gun. . . ."

FRAMED, READY TO HANG!

CHAPTER ONE

Little Man With a Gun

YOU get up there, on top of the world, where I was, by working while other guys play. If you beat your brains out, and worry, and work, you wind up in my spot—standing in your own restaurant,

watching the evening trade. There were eighteen restaurants in the chain, and I owned every one, free and clear.

Big-headed? I don't think so. I was riding high, and I knew it. Also, it gave



me a kick. That's the point in making your pile while you're young enough. You're up there where nothing can touch you, and tomorrow's the night to put a four-carat diamond on a girl. Girl by the name of Lola Grashin—a nice girl, with plenty of class. She was the only thing I needed, the only thing I didn't have.

I watched Pug Lester come in, and I was glad to see him. Pug Lester was a detective, and sometimes when he walked in I could see fear appear in the eyes of some men. To me Pug was just a customer whose weakness was fine food.

I said, "Good evening, Lieutenant. Much murder in the town?"

"A little," said Lester, "here and there. Most of it's old and stale though, so I figured I might as well eat." He nodded to the head waiter and eased himself into a booth.

"I read you picked up the fellow who killed the liquor store owner."

Pug Lester buttered a piece of melba and shoved it into his mouth. "Yeah," he said. "We got him. And like all of 'em, he started to scream he was framed."

I said, "Do you think he was?"

Pug Lester snorted. "They almost never are." He moved his arm to make room for the sea-food cocktail, picked up a tiny fork and lunged at a shrimp. Then, nodding his approval of the speared morsel, he gestured toward the seat. "Why don't you sit down, Roney?"

I grinned. "Thanks, I'd like to. But I've got to crawl back in my office. Taxpayer like myself has to work like hell on his account books to keep you in two-inch steaks."

"I eat a lot," Pug Lester said comfortably, "but I figure I earn my keep."

I nodded. "I'll drop by the kitchen on my way and tell the chef to slaughter another cow. Anything you want tonight, Lieutenant. Did I tell you I bought a warehouse full of pineapple last week? And have you heard that today the dock workers

went out on strike? I'll make a killing."

Pug Lester shook his head. "Boy, sometimes I think you're *too* lucky. For your sake, I hope it holds."

"It'll hold," I said. "Relax."

He grunted, and I drifted to the rear of the place and went through the door marked "Private."

THE little man didn't get up when I entered the office. He didn't move at all, but sat there, blending in with the shadows to one side of my desk. When he spoke, his voice came out in a friendly snarl, as if he were trying to be diplomatic and didn't quite know how.

"I looked around," the small man said, "but I couldn't find any booze."

A lush. That was my first thought. I said, "Maybe you'd do better if you tried out in the bar."

"That ain't very friendly of you, Mr. Roney—an' friendly's the way you should be." He crossed his legs and leaned back in the leather chair. His thin mouth split in a grin. His eyes were in the shadows, and I wondered if the desk lamp was responsible for the illusion of pointed teeth.

"We'll go on with friendship," I told him, "after you tell me who you are." The fact that this was my office, and that the man was sitting in my favorite chair—these things were annoying but bearable.

He said, "My name's Sampson, fella. I work for a guy named McGuire."

"I've heard of him," I said carefully. "What do you want?"

"That's easy," said Sampson. "McGuire wants to rent a little space from you."

I said, "He doesn't have to rent it. He can walk in and take a table at any restaurant in the chain. That's the way the restaurant business is. It's open to all the public. You can't keep anybody out."

"That's why the setup looks so good," Sampson said. "People walk in and out all day. Nothing suspicious there. And you got a fair-sized chain; you're makin' plen-

ty of money. The way McGuire's got it figured, we get the nod from you, an' then in the back of each and every eatery, we plant a bookie joint."

I laughed, thinking of McGuire's reputation. I said, "A bookie joint, and a shop for receiving stolen goods, and maybe a little dope mill to one side. We could get modernistic showcases for attractive displays of heroin and cocaine."

The friendliness went out of Sampson's snarl. He said, "McGuire don't mess with dope."

"That isn't the way I heard it," I said. "But that's your business. Tell your boss the answer's no."

He got up. Standing, he was not quite so small as he had seemed slumped down in the chair. But he was thin, and shorter than I. He had a lean and pointed face. "That ain't the answer I came for," he said. "I brought you a business proposition, an' before you even talk about it, you're giving me a no."

"McGuire and I can't do business," I said. "I don't want any part of McGuire."

"You want to remember," the little man said, "you're doin' good now, doin' fine. The way I hear it, you came up fast. Now you got a big chain of swell hash joints. But you always want to remember, you can go down the same way you came up."

I smiled, but I wasn't amused. I said, "I built Roney Restaurants with a little luck and one hell of a lot of hard work. When I go down, it'll be my fault. It won't be because I let some punk of McGuire's tell me what to do."

The little man came forward, rolling a little as he walked. His hands were at his sides. He said, "You shouldn't done that, Roney. You shouldn't call people punks."

I was tired. I had been through a long, hard day. Sure I liked the work. But managing a chain of restaurants isn't something to soothe the nerves, nor was the harsh voice of Sampson doing anything to help. The man came forward, and when he

was close enough, I reached with my left hand and grabbed his coat lapels.

Sampson said, "Let go, or I'll—"

My right hand caught him across the mouth. Then, as he pawed frantically to reach his shoulder holster, I backed him against the wall near the door, belting him each time he opened his mouth.

When he clamped his mouth tightly and no longer cursed or talked, I stopped slapping him and reached in and took the gun.

Stepping back, I withdrew the clip, and ejected the shell from the chamber. Then I handed the gun back to Sampson. "Next time," I said, "bring two. You can see one isn't enough."

He said nothing. He just stood there, looking at me. There was something about his eyes; it seemed as if a film had come over them. He watched me through a thin, grey veil.

I tossed the gun, and Sampson caught it. He slipped it inside his coat, and although it was no longer loaded, he kept his hand on the butt. It seemed to give him strength.

"When you check with your boss," I said, "don't forget the answer's no."

Sampson nodded, and then the flood of words came out. "I'll tell him, tough boy. But there's one mistake you made. With me, before, it was business. Either way you took it, it wasn't anything to me. Before, it was just business. But you made it *personal* now." He smiled, and a little trickle of blood came from his split lip and ran down his narrow chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand, and turned, and went out the door.

I chuckled, watching him go. The day was gone when a punk like that could hurt me or my restaurants. I had built a secure business, with a good reputation. It never occurred to me that the matter was serious enough to report to the police.

THAT was Saturday night, and nothing happened Sunday, except that my housekeeper came about noon with the

news that she was quitting. No, it was nothing about the job. She liked keeping house for me, but her sister was sick, the one in New Orleans, and she had to go there for a while.

I phoned a cab for the woman, and watched her go with no particular regret. She hadn't been with me long, and her management of me and my household affairs was nothing that could not be duplicated by merely phoning an employment agency the first thing Monday morning.

As it turned out, I didn't even have to do that. My problem was solved when the doorbell rang late Sunday afternoon. I got up and went to the door.

The girl said, "Good afternoon. I'm looking for Mr. Roney."

I said, "How do you do? Won't you come in?" I tried to place her—waitress, hostess, entertainer. She could be any of these. She went ahead of me into the living room, a slim girl, yet padded nicely. I could tell it wasn't the suit. She sat when I offered a chair, but when I offered a drink, she said, "Before I get too comfortable, perhaps I'd better tell you—I came about the job."

"Job?" I said. I had a personnel man who took care of hiring the restaurant help. Furthermore, there was nothing about this girl that made you think of a person who wanted a job.

"I knew Mrs. Ferguson slightly," the girl said. "She told me she was leaving, and suggested you might be hiring another housekeeper."

I opened my mouth slightly and stared at her.

She smiled. "It's not as silly as it sounds, Mr. Roney. Incidentally, my name's Elaine Watkins."

There was, I supposed, no reason why a housekeeper *had* to be old and homely. On the other hand . . . I said, "Miss Watkins, have you ever been a housekeeper before? Do you know what housekeepers make?"

"Mrs. Ferguson said you paid two hundred. I'm sure that would be all right with me, if you think I'd be satisfactory."

"Have you tried keeping house before?"

"No . . . I'm afraid if it's references you want, I won't be able to give them. I've been a model, up until now."

I leaned back in my chair. "And you'd give that up to keep house?"

"Why not?" She was laughing at me.

"Doesn't it pay more? Don't you find it's more interesting work?"

She turned brisk now. "Mr. Roney, have you any idea what a model makes?"

"None at all," I said.

"A few hundred in the entire country make a real living. But for every one of these there are a hundred who are lucky if they get enough to eat. I've been at it for more than a year now. I've averaged about twenty a week."

I smiled. "I'm beginning to see your point."

She got up and loosened her jacket. I said, "Well, I suppose there's no reason why a man's housekeeper has to be hideous, though I'm sure you'll be something of a shock to the girl I'm going to marry, and to the wives of some of my friends."

"I'll do my hair plain," Elaine Watkins said. "I'll put it up in a bun."

I said, "Whatever you like, Miss Watkins. I'll show you to your room."

CHAPTER TWO

Spare Corpse

THAT evening, after I'd showered, I found a change of clothing laid out for me, though I had not told Miss Watkins I was going out. Downstairs, there were ice cubes ready on the bar, and beside them a bottle of my favorite Scotch. When I asked about the clothing, Elaine Watkins smiled.

"I checked your date book," she said, "the one near the telephone. It said 'dinner

with Lola.' so I assumed you'd need some clothes."

"And the Scotch?" I asked.

"You have three cases on hand," she said drily. "Either you're very fond of it, or else you'd like to use it up."

I said, "Genius, Miss Watkins. Pure genius . . . Look, I won't be home until late. Why don't you take the night off?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps," she said carelessly. "Tonight I've too much to do."

I said good-bye and went out, savoring the pleasant warmth of the Scotch, and congratulating myself on having hired this girl who, unless I was very wrong, would run my house like a charm.

The pleasant feeling that everything was going well stayed with me all through dinner with Lola Grashin. We were lingering over coffee and cigarettes at Mauri Malcoln's club, and I was just where I wanted to be. I didn't want to own the world. Just a small piece of the town was enough.

I looked at the girl I was going to marry. Wide grey eyes, soft now, but they could shine with swift intelligence. The kind of a figure meant for display, but Lola had too much class to display it conspicuously.

I touched the ring in my pocket and said, "Darling, I've something for you—a little thing to celebrate the fact that the dockworkers went out on strike today."

She looked puzzled. "Are you interested in the longshoreman's union?"

"No," I said, laughing. "But I'm the foresighted lad who bought enough pineapple to last for six months."

"That's good?" Lola asked.

"It's perfect. Either the competition quits serving pineapple, or else they buy it from me. Either way, I'm sitting pretty."

She said, "You always are." She said it thoughtfully, but I wasn't paying much attention. My mind was moving ahead, deciding what to say.

There was no point in trying for a fancy phrase. I said simply, "I want to marry you, Lola."

For a moment, I thought she hadn't heard. She was looking the other way. I said, "Lola—"

"I heard you, Dick." Her voice was sad. "And I suppose I love you. But that doesn't change anything."

I said, "What—"

"Let me finish, Dick. I'm afraid I couldn't live with a person who was always, unfailingly right. Of course I know how hard you've worked to get where you are today. And I think it's admirable, truly. I've thought about it often. And it isn't that you're conceited. It's merely that you're so damned smug."

"The pineapple?" I said, grinning.

"As much as anything," she answered. "You managed to link your proposal with a boast about how you cornered the market."

I looked at her hands. They were gripping her purse, and now she picked up her gloves. I said, "But, Lola—I *don't* make many mistakes. Not now. Sure, I made plenty as a kid. But I've learned—"

She stood up, and I stopped talking.

"Phone me," she said quietly, "when a couple of tarnished spots show up on the golden boy." She moved away from the table, and I stood there, watching her go. I knew better than to follow. She wasn't a girl to run because she wanted to be pursued.

When she had gone, I sat thinking. At first I was stunned. I had known Lola long enough to realize that the thing between us was more than a passing emotion. Then, as I thought about it, I realized that our feeling for each other was certainly mutual. And if she felt as strongly as I did, why then, she would change her mind.

Feeling more cheerful, I chalked up her conduct as a feminine whim. The waiter brought another drink, and I sat alone at the table, looking around the club.

Across the room I could see Mauri Malcoln, the club owner. He was chatting lightly with the patrons and at the same

time trying to estimate the evening's take.

The thought of Mauri's expenses made me quite cheerful again. Inwardly, I congratulated myself. I had expanded with more restaurants instead of doing what most restaurant owners did. Malcolm could have the headaches that went with this smart supper club.

I SCANNED the room. Two thirds of the tables were filled, but I knew that wasn't enough. I had seen the fixed smile night club owners get just before their baby folds. Mauri Malcolm was wearing it now.

I got back the feeling I'd had earlier. I was Dick Roney, thirty-six. No debts. A large bank balance, and the loveliest girl in the world who would change her mind as soon as . . .

I saw the other girl. Mauri Malcolm was bending over her table with the special smile he reserved for beautiful women.

I pushed back my chair, got up and circled the dance floor. The girl in organdy did not look in my direction. She was leaving the room. I caught up with her in the heavily carpeted hall. Here, close up, she looked even more like Elaine Watkins, and so I said, "Miss Watkins!" in a loud tone, and waited for her to turn.

She did, but it was obvious from her cool stare that she'd turned because of my voice, and not because of the name. She looked through me with an expression that said she didn't know me and didn't care to. Then she went into the powder room, and the door swung shut in my face.

I went back to my table, trying to seem poised and at ease. But I imagine I had the hang-dog look of a heel who has just made an unsuccessful pass at another man's wife.

Shortly after that, I paid the check and ambled out of the club. The Century bar was down the street, and I picked up two more drinks there.

But somehow, I couldn't relax. It wasn't

my night to be out on the town. Something—my anxiety about my housekeeper—was urging me to go home.

I went, driving with unconscious haste. At the house, I put the car away, and entered very quietly. Just inside, I paused and listened, then walked toward the housekeeper's room.

Elaine Watkins was in bed. I saw that by the light of the street lamp that shone through the open window. The covers were well down from her shoulders, and the filmy, shadowy fabric of her nightgown was rising and falling as she breathed. The tempo was regular, almost hypnotic. It was, I realized, high time I got out of there.

Moving quietly down the hall, I turned the thing over in my mind. Either the girl had come in early, or she had not gone out at all. There was, of course, no reason why my housekeeper should not spend her evenings at Mauri Malcolm's club. I knew Malcolm slightly. We had been business rivals before Malcolm sold a group of three restaurants to plunge more heavily on the night club.

Malcolm was as honest as any business man, and there was no reason why the girl shouldn't know him. There was also no reason, as far as I was concerned, why a model should not accept expensive clothing—if that was the life she wanted. But models who wanted that life did not take jobs as housekeepers. Not for two hundred a month.

Entering the library, I switched on the light and headed for the sideboard. Mixing a drink, I thought of Lola. I'd phone her early tomorrow and straighten everything out.

I turned, sipping from the tall glass, enjoying it and the soft play of light on the polished wood. The lighting was subdued, and that too added something to my feeling of quiet peace. This was the place to come back to, the house for a man who had everything. Here, in my own home, even the shadows were warm and friendly.

Except for the new shadow. It was one I had never noticed before. There was, in fact, no reason why it should be there behind the wing-backed chair.

I moved. The shadow did not. I took a long, deep pull on my drink and held the glass in my hand, as I knelt to inspect the body.

Then I stood up and switched on a floor lamp. The man on the floor was Mauri Malcolm. He had been shot in the head.

I listened, and there were no sounds. All through the house there was still the same silence that had, only a moment before, given a feeling of peace.

Then, very loud in the stillness, a phone dial whirred in another room. Walking softly, I followed the sound.

I went through the hall to my bedroom. The door was slightly ajar. Shoving gently, I opened it.

MY HOUSEKEEPER was sitting on my bed. She was wearing the same transparent nightgown I had seen when I came in. Over it she had donned an equally transparent wrapper.

"Yes!" she was saying. "It was Mr. Roney! I was asleep and they woke me up with their quarreling. Then I looked in and saw Mr. Roney fire the gun, and—"

"Wait a minute!" I yelled. I crossed the room and snatched the phone from her hand. "Hello. Who am I talking to?"

"Sergeant Pound, Police. Who are you?"

"I'm Dick Roney. And I don't know what ails this woman, but I certainly haven't killed anybody."

The sergeant said in a tired voice, "But somebody has been shot?"

"Yes, a man by the name of Malcolm. I just found him on the floor."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Don't move him. We'll be there right away."

I put down the phone. The girl had

moved to the other side of the room, and she was standing with her back to the dresser, watching me without fear.

I said, "I ought to slap you silly. What kind of a tale is that you just spouted into the phone?" I took a forward step.

She said, "Keep away, Mr. Roney. If it wasn't you, it looked like you."

My mind spun back over the evening. Not anything I could think of helped me to add things up. "There are some things I'd like to know," I said, "before the police get here. For example, what were you doing at Malcolm's club earlier this evening? I see you talking to him, and then I find him on my floor."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't been out of the house."

"We'll skip the question of why a girl like you wanted to keep house for me. We'll let that go for a moment. But tell me this: If you saw me murder a man, what made you stick around to use the phone? Why didn't you run outside?"

"Why should I? I'm not afraid of you."

I snorted. "You ought to be. If you're framing me for one murder, you ought to know the price is the same for two." I held my eyes on hers, and watched some trace of fear move like a small shadow over her face.

Someone said from the doorway, "A bargain, too."

I spun to face the voice. I saw the gun, and the man behind it, the little man I'd met in my office. The man McGuire had sent. I glimpsed the quick show of pointed teeth, saw the flash of the gun, heard its sharp explosion.

It was a second before I realized that the bullet had been for the girl.

She went down with a throaty sigh, crumpling with soft grace. Filmy cloth fanned out around her as she lay motionless on the floor.

I waited for the slug to crash into my body, found myself wanting to close my eyes. I kept them open. The little man

wiped the gun with his handkerchief, then tossed it on the floor.

I was calculating the distance, ready to try a quick dive for the weapon, when the man called Sampson drew another gun.

"Leave it there," he said. The second gun looked enormous in his small hand.

"You use a different gun-for each killing?" I asked. "It must run to a lot of expense."

The little man ignored the crack. He was grinning, looking as happy as a man could look with so tiny and wizened a face. "You look good," he said suddenly. "You look wonderful—all tacked up in a three-sided frame."

"You're crazy," I said. "You think the police will buy this story?"

"They'll buy it," he said. "Only I won't be here to tell it. They'll get it straight from you."

"You know what I'll tell them, don't you?" I moved slightly toward him, stopped when he jerked the gun.

"Keep back," he said. "I don't really want to shoot you before you have time to enjoy the frame. I'd rather have you fry for murder. That way you have plenty of time to remember who you slapped."

"I should have slapped you harder," I said. "How could the police think I killed these people? What motive would I have?"

"You knocked off the dame," said Sampson, "because she saw you murder Malcolm. She said so on the phone."

"And Malcolm?"

The little man shrugged easily. "You were business competitors," he said. "You know how these things go."

I glanced at the clock. The police ought to be arriving now. If I could keep Sampson here, keep him talking . . . I said, "All right. You're sore at me because I kicked you out of my office. But Malcolm—what did you have against him?"

"He was another wise lad who didn't want to do business. But, in a way, he got off easy, on account of he had sense enough

not to slap anybody around, like you did."

I thought of Malcolm, dead in the library, Malcolm who had gotten off easy. I swung my eyes to the crumpled girl. "What about her?" I asked.

"What about her?" Sampson lifted his shoulders. "She was just a greedy gertie. She wasn't nobody's doll." Sirens wailed in the distance. Sampson cocked an attentive ear. "Be seein' you," he said. "If you think it'll do you any good, you can mention me and McGuire." He backed out the door and was gone.

I jumped toward the gun on the floor, stopped myself when it was inches from my hand. If McGuire and this little hood had set out to frame me, it wouldn't be a clumsy job. For one thing, Sampson had wiped the butt of the gun. If it was the same gun he'd brought to my office, then my fingerprints could still be on the barrel. McGuire and Sampson would be able to account for all of their movements this night. They would have the best alibis money could buy. And as my mind slipped desperately from point to point, I knew McGuire would have covered them, too.

The sound of sirens ceased. That meant the police were nearing the house. I looked once more at the girl on the floor, the girl who was nobody's doll. With a little corner of my mind, I wondered what kind of a life she had wanted, what her ambitions had been. I moved quickly to the window, climbed through, and dropped into the garden at the rear of the house.

From somewhere across the lawn, someone said, "All right, Roney. Stick around."

I hesitated, conscious that the upper half of my body was silhouetted neatly against the lighted window at my back. I stood frozen for just an instant. Then I dove over the hedge.

I went through it, feeling the tearing grip of the branches, and behind me I heard the light, quick thud of feet running on damp sod.

"Roney! You damn fool—hold it! Don't

make me plug you, boy!" Pug Lester's exasperated plea turned into a string of curses as he crashed into the hedge.

Racing along the dark lane that flanked the rear of the garden, I was thankful for that hedge. I was also grateful to Lester, for I was aware that he could easily have shot me as I stood at the window, again as I ran across the lawn. I owed Lester a hearty thank you which I meant to deliver some time. Some time, but, not just now.

CHAPTER THREE

The Slaughter Syndicate

THE night went by in a series of terrifyingly close encounters—with prowling cars and policemen, individuals who came out of shadowy corners, asking me for matches. I walked until dawn. There wasn't any place I dared go, and walking helped me think.

I didn't like my thoughts. Walking lonely and afraid, I had time to remember what Lola had said about my smugness. I was a boy with a strangle hold on the world. Nothing could ever go wrong. She hadn't wanted to marry a guy whose life ran on well-oiled wheels. I wondered, with some bitterness, if she'd like me better now that I faced two murder raps.

Then honesty forced me to admit it. I wouldn't be walking alone right now if I hadn't felt so secure. Any fool, after the first interview with the little gunman, would have gone to the police.

These were the things I was thinking as I slunk along dismal streets.

In the morning, I bought a shave in a neighborhood barber shop. It made me feel better, but as I walked out into the sunlight, I still had not decided what to do.

I called police headquarters from a public phone and asked for Pug Lester.

The lieutenant said, "Lester speaking," mechanically, as if he had many things on his mind.

"This is Roney, Lieutenant."

"Ah!" said Pug Lester. "Where are you now?"

"In town. But I'm thinking of leaving. I phoned to tell you I'm sorry about last night."

"No trouble at all," Lester said grimly. "I needed the exercise. May I suggest that you get the hell down here as fast as you can?"

"I'll be in," I said vaguely, "sooner or later. But I've got a few things to do."

There was a silence. That would be Pug Lester's hand clamping tight on the mouthpiece while he detailed someone in the office to trace the call.

I said sharply, "Don't send anyone after me, Pug. I won't be here when they come."

There was a pause. "What else can I do?" Lester said. "Why don't you come in? Isn't that why you called?"

"No," I said slowly. "I was hoping that you'd found out who killed those people. I had no reason to, you know."

"Look," Pug Lester said. "The dame said she saw you kill Malcolm. She said that over the phone."

"But why should I kill Malcolm? I knew him only slightly."

"That isn't what the letters say."

"What letters?" I asked blankly.

"Correspondence between you and Malcolm. We found a couple of his letters in your files—a couple of yours in his. If you kids were fond of each other, you were certainly talking tough."

"But I never . . ." Then I realized the futility of denial. "Are you sure they're genuine?"

Pug said, "Me? I'm sure of nothing. The boys in the lab are still working, but they seem to like the signatures well enough."

I stared out through the glass door of the phone booth. The air seemed suddenly stifling. I was holding the phone like a man in a trance.

Pug Lester said sharply. "Roney! You

still there? Don't hang up on me, Roney! I want to talk to you!"

The urgency in the lieutenant's voice brought me to my senses. I realized suddenly how long we had been talking. Lester would certainly have the call traced, and the police would arrive at any moment. Indeed, they might well be here right now. I hung up the phone and drifted out of the booth.

The ancient druggist eyed me without particular interest as I moved out into the street. At the corner I caught a street car, but I had no feeling of safety until, after a mile on the trolley, I changed to a cross-town bus.

The ride seemed to clear my head, and I found myself able to think. McGuire and Sampson had fitted me with a frame, which, if not perfect, was at least good enough to cause the public to hold and try me for murder. True, it might not stand up under careful investigation, but I disliked the idea of taking up residence in a death cell on the off chance that Pug Lester or some other enterprising detective would come along and kick me out.

Having rejected the services of the police, I felt the loneliness pressing in upon me. In a few short hours, I, Dick Roney, had become a furtive, frightened thing who dared not pause for rest.

I set out to find McGuire. It took longer than you'd think. It meant making discreet inquiries in several book-making establishments. It meant watching men's eyes drift far off the moment I mentioned the name.

Finally, as I was leaving a south-side bar, a heavy-set man stepped out from the wall of the building. He looked so much like a detective, I was tempted to run. But the man was blocking the way. Neither of us said anything while the man thoughtfully brought out a match and bit off the end.

Then he said, "Understand you're looking for McGuire?"

I said, "I was." Then I remembered

that the man had not been in the bar. "How did you know?" I added.

"We heard." He moved toward a car at the curb. Opening one door for me, he circled lazily and climbed in under the wheel. "Let's go," he said.

I hesitated, then I realized that McGuire was my one wild chance. I climbed in and slammed the door. The car went forward in a sighing rush.

McGUIRE'S place ran to spacious, quiet reception rooms. The furniture in the offices ran into heavy dough. The receptionist looked like something in the social register, and McGuire looked like the most successful member of the bar association.

He didn't rise when I came in, but a slight smile furnished the illusion of pleasantness, and a curt nod dismissed my escort. The heavy-set man nodded briskly and backed out through the door.

I stood easily on the soft, thick pile of the carpet, and when I saw Sampson watching from a corner of the room, I said, "Well! My little friend."

Sampson let it pass. McGuire's grey eyes rested on me thoughtfully. When he spoke, his deep, cultured voice went well with his surroundings. His face was handsome, almost noble. An international banker would have been proud to own his suit.

"Forgive me," McGuire said, "if I seem to stare at you. When I heard you were trying to find me, I knew I was going to meet an unusual man."

"That's damned nice of you," I said. "But I'm afraid you'll find I'm a pretty standard guy, or I was until yesterday."

"No," McGuire corrected. "The average man would not have come here."

"Would've had more sense," said Sampson.

"Can't you keep him quiet?" I asked.

"If you prefer. However, there is some truth in what he says," McGuire stood up. "I'm afraid my schedule is pretty crowded. You're here—now, what do you want?"

"A chair," I said. I chose one fairly close to the desk, sat down with my legs sprawled out. "Tired," I explained. "I've been walking." I hoped they wouldn't notice how nervous I was if I pretended to own the joint.

Sampson said, "You might as well walk while you can."

I looked appealingly at McGuire. "He's talking again," I complained. "And every time he opens his mouth, one of us loses money."

McGuire sat down. "Would it take you very long," he asked, "to tell us why you came?"

"I would have come when you first invited me," I said, "if you'd sent anyone but this little clown."

Sampson sprang up and moved to the desk. "How about it, Mac?" he said. "How's if I slap this loud-mouth around, then feed him to the cops?"

"You see what I mean?" I said mildly. "The boy has too much bounce."

McGuire wasn't looking at Sampson. He said, "Let's get on with it, Roney."

"All right. Put it this way. What do you hope to gain by having me take the rap for two murders?"

"Let's assume," said McGuire, "that I know what you're talking about—which I don't. Then the answer is, I gain nothing."

"And you call yourself a business man?"

"I am a business man," said McGuire. "I sent a man to you with a proposition which you refused. I have no further interest in you or your affairs."

"Here's a proposition for you," I said. "Go on."

"Call off your dogs, and get what you wanted in the first place—a branch office for your syndicate in each of my restaurants."

McGuire looked at me, cool and amused. "It's likely I'll get that anyway," he said. "Nof from you, but from your successor."

I let my eyes move from one to the other—McGuire, suave and superior; Samp-

son's pinched face full of hatred, but with something in it of smugness. That, I guessed, would be about as close to a happy expression as the little hood could manage. In Sampson's mind, this meeting probably came under the heading of watching the sucker squirm.

I said, "You know who my successor is?"

McGuire shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I manage to do business with most people."

"With the Paramount Insurance Company? If I'm out of the picture, management of the chain reverts to a holding company owned by them."

Something flickered in McGuire's eyes, but his face remained bland and smooth.

"You're big, McGuire," I said, "but I doubt if you're big enough to tamper with Paramount Insurance. With their own investigators and the political pressure they could bring to bear, the outfit would run you silly."

Sampson said, "You heard enough of this, boss?"

"Gag him," I said impatiently. "Listen, McGuire. There may be some people you don't need, but I'm not one of them."

"This is all very interesting," said McGuire, "and sounds in spots rather unfortunate. But what do you suggest?"

I smiled. "Are we talking openly?" I asked. "Can we assume we all know I'm in a frame?"

"Let's assume that for the moment," said McGuire.

Sampson jeered, "How do you like the fit?"

McGuire said, "What's your suggestion, Roney?"

I grinned. "Enlarge the frame. It ought to fit someone else—in fact, I have a pigeon in mind."

NARROWING his eyes, McGuire said, "Let us look at this thing for a moment. Yesterday you were too honest to want a syndicate branch in your restaur-

rants. Today you are perfectly willing to frame a man for murder. Isn't this something of a change?"

I said, "Not as much as you might think. As your stooge here has said, I came up fast. A man in a hurry almost always resorts to—let us say—expedients. Also," I forced a smile, "I'd be something of a fool if I were not slightly swayed by the pressure you've applied."

"Anything else?" McGuire said tonelessly. I could tell nothing from his voice.

"Money," I said. "I have always been open to suggestions that would help me make more. Only"—I pointed to Sampson—"I did resent your sending this jerk with a business proposition."

Sampson said desperately, "McGuire, don't let this guy—"

"The purpose of this organization," McGuire said coldly, "is to make money. All other considerations are secondary. Try to remember that—as long as you are working for me."

Sampson returned to his chair.

"As I said," I began, "I have a man in mind—a man who will have no alibi. He was home alone when Malcolm and the girl were killed."

McGuire said, "His motive?"

I thought of the girl crumpled pathetically on the floor of my bedroom. I put the thought out of my mind. "Love," I said. "And revenge. The girl was his, and when he found her at my house with Malcolm, he blew his top and killed them both."

Sampson snorted. "He'd have to be a dope to fit that picture."

"He is," I answered quietly. "He's a slob."

McGuire said, "Sampson's right. If your man has any brains, he can wriggle out."

"He hasn't any," I said. "But why don't you look him over? I can arrange a meeting tonight."

McGuire said nothing for a moment. His eyes seemed to turn inward, inspecting possible gain and loss. When he looked at

me again, it was obvious he had made up his mind.

"What time," he said, "and where?"

"Ten tonight," I said. "His apartment's Number 7, at 210 West Nautilus. I'll see that he's there." I got up, and my shaking legs reluctantly held my weight. Not until then did I know how much I'd been afraid. "See you then," I said.

"Roney."

"Yeah."

"Before you go—remember. Don't play it too smart. Compared to some ways I know, the chair can be an easy way to die."

"I believe you," I said soberly. I glanced at Sampson.

The little man said softly, "I almost hope something *does* go wrong, so I can get one more crack at you."

I let it go. I said, "Thanks for your time, McGuire. I think you'll find it's worth it."

"I hope so," McGuire answered. His cold grey eyes bored into mine. "I get very upset, Roney, when it turns out I've made a mistake. What's this fellow's name?"

"Lester," I said. "George Lester." I watched the two of them. Neither did a take. I got out of there in a hurry and headed for a phone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Date With Death

PUG LESTER'S voice came coldly over the wire. Outside the booth, I could see the waitress behind the counter, methodically chewing her gum. Lester was saying, "What about it, bright boy? When are you coming in?"

"I'd rather meet you," I said.

"All right," he said shortly. "Say where."

"Your apartment. Ten o'clock tonight."

"My apartment," he repeated. "Why there? We've got some business, boy—remember? This won't be a social call."

I said, "Pug, I'm going to ask for the biggest favor you ever did any man."

"Go on," Pug Lester said.

"I want you to remove anything from your apartment that would indicate you're a cop. Pictures. Pistol trophies. All that kind of stuff."

"And then?" Pug said without warmth.

"At ten, I come in with some friends. You play dumb. You're not a cop. You sell—coffee. Sure. Coffee's good enough." I stopped talking. The waitress out in the coffee shop was craning her neck for a better view, idly trying for a better view of something out on the street.

I said sharply, "Pug, you still there?"

"Yeah," he said, "but, I dunno—"

The waitress nodded lazily, and then Sampson came into view. He had seen me, and he was grinning as he headed for the phone booth.

I said, "Pug! I can't talk any more!"

THERE was a long silence. I held the receiver against my ear while Sampson came right up to the booth and pressed his face against the glass. Then Pug Lester's voice said, "Okay, Roney. See you at ten."

I said, "Fine," and hung up the phone.

"What's fine?" Sampson said, as I opened the door.

I said, "My girl still loves me. What are you doing here?"

"Tailing you," he said promptly. "You left so fast I had trouble picking you up."

"You might have had more trouble," I told him. "Sometimes, after I talk to my girl, I take off like a jet plane."

Sampson patted his shoulder holster.

"Why don't you try it?" he said softly.

There was no point in bickering with the little gunman. I said, "Look, Sampson. I've got to keep off the streets. Haven't you got a place to stay? You could save wear and tear on your feet, and I could phone McGuire."

"Yeah," he said. "Come on."

He took me to a fancy apartment that looked like a chorus girl's dream. We stayed there all through the afternoon and evening. At 9:45, McGuire's chauffeur rang and said McGuire was waiting downstairs in his car. We didn't keep him waiting. We went down right away.

Pug Lester's apartment was on the second floor of an old house that had submitted to remodeling. Pug Lester let us in, and, when I inspected the living room, I saw nothing that would indicate a police officer lived in the place. There were several light patches on the walls where pictures had been removed, and I was grateful to the detective for attending to this detail.

Pug closed the door behind us, and went back to the chair. His fat cheeks almost hid his eyes as he sat there, looking up. "Scuse me," he said, "if I seem to sit down. I had a busy day."

Sampson said nothing; he remained standing to one side of the apartment door, wary and unconvinced.

McGuire went to Pug Lester, and stood, eyeing the fat man critically. "He looks stupid enough," he said finally.

Pug Lester said lazily, "You boys playin' some kind of a joke?"

"A little one," said McGuire. "You can play too. Know where you were last night?"

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Detective Tales, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 295 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 295 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 295 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Henry Steeger, 295 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Shirley M. Steeger, 295 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 16th day of September, 1951. Era M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 21-9508988. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1953 (Seal) —Form 1026—Rev. 5-50.

"Right here," Pug Lester said, "mostly."

"Anyone with you?"

"Nope. I was all alone." Pug Lester sighed heavily, and his eyes opened wide enough for me to see the bored impatience in their depths.

Suddenly, I knew it would not go off as planned. Pug Lester, with me there before him, was not going to wait through a lot of what to him was aimless talk. In that same moment I realized that my position had not changed. McGuire and Sampson could walk out. The detective would have no reason to hold them. That would leave me where I began—with a ticket for the chair.

For a second time that day, I cursed myself for a chump. If I had given Lester some idea of what I was doing, my chances would have been better. Right now my chances were zero. I knew Pug wasn't going to wait.

Into the silence, I said, "What about it? Think he'll do?"

McGuire swung his head impatiently. "We'll see," he said. "Let's not hurry."

Pug Lester said, "Do for what?"

"You had a girl," I said, talking desperately, "who sometimes called herself Elaine Watkins. It was a secret thing—nobody knew. And the reason you killed her and Malcolm was jealousy—an old reason, but always good. Malcolm was taking your girl away, and you, a coffee salesman, couldn't compete with him." I glanced at McGuire. The gambling czar was frowning at my awkward pitch. I looked back at Pug Lester.

The detective's chins were pleated on his neck. His mouth was open slightly. He said, "What're you tryin' to do, Roney? Cop an insanity plea?"

Nothing moved in the room. I grinned tautly, thinking of McGuire's bewilderment. It was not easy to frame pigeons who talk about copping a plea.

Then McGuire said, "Sampson!"

The little gunman seemed to flick a hand

at his lapel, and then the gun was in his hand. He swung it slowly, saying nothing, letting his lips draw back from his teeth.

"That wasn't smart of you," McGuire said softly. "It wasn't bright of either of you. In fact, if I were asked to say what had caused your death, I should have to say stupidity."

Pug Lester said placidly, "You mean you're going to kill him and me too?" His small nod included me.

McGuire inclined his head. "I'm afraid Sampson will insist."

"Just askin'," Pug Lester said.

I thought, but I couldn't be sure, that one of Lester's plump hands brought the gun up from under the cushion. It was a large gun, a .45. It made a hellish roar in the room, and it blew out a section of Sampson's head.

The slender little hood made no noise as he fell forward on the worn carpet.

McGuire lunged at me. I spun away to avoid being used as a shield. As I whirled, I clipped McGuire on the side of the head.

The man stepped back nimbly. He was far from soft, I observed—probably kept in condition by handball and boxing at his club. I moved toward him, carrying my hands low, swinging precisely. McGuire gave ground slowly, dodging and weaving. Then, abruptly, he landed a straight left that snapped my head back, followed it with a right cross that drove me to the floor.

FALLING, with the pink mist in front of my eyes, I could see Pug Lester still sitting in the chair. The mist was still there, but some of it went away when I bounced on the carpet. Digging my nails into the short pile, I hauled myself to my feet.

McGuire came in again, and I had to shake my head to get his image clearly. Then I saw the smooth pink face, red now, and fiercely contorted. One of McGuire's fists lashed along my cheek.

(Continued on page 112)



"Sure," she said.
"Sure, everything's
... fine."

By
FRANCIS K. ALLAN
NIGHT
of
TERROR

Only now, when she was so close to death, could Polly know how much she had to live for. . . .

THE motor of the yellow convertible sputtered and started to miss. Polly glanced at the gas gauge; it registered empty. "Oh, damn," she said in a nervous whisper. Then a neon sign appeared around the bend of the highway. It was a garage, a big garage, called LeRoy's Rest. A few tractor trailers stood in the

darkness of the parking space, off to the side.

She headed for the gas pumps. Then suddenly she stiffened as car lights were reflected in her rear-view mirror. They were coming fast, and a spot-light was swinging back and forth across the highway shoulders. That would be it, she had a feeling.

She cut the wheels and headed into the gloom beyond a battered trailer. She made it with an ounce to spare. Quickly she got out and watched the lights speeding nearer. They swept across the parking space and she ducked. Wheels skidded on gravel.

"There's the car! She's here," a man shouted triumphantly.

"Oh, how very wrong, Mr. Big-and-Important," Polly breathed. "Not until you find her." She ran, bending low, toward the rear of the battered trailer. It was like the game of hide-and-seek, she thought. She'd played the game with this same Mr. Big, but years ago when she was seven and he was ten. Which only proved how calendars and men could change, or something.

She managed to open the trailer, and crawled into the grease-scented blackness. She closed the door and huddled there. It was *one* way of spending a wedding night, she reflected. An almost-wedding night, she corrected. The distinction was very important. She was small, but she was curved and she was lovely. Her eyes were dark blue, and her hair was black as a pail of soot at midnight.

She could hear them out there in the darkness, making a big fuss now. First her father: "I'm Judge Arthur McCorkle, and that's my daughter's car. Where is she?"

Then Willy's voice, very enraged, but worried, too. "My fiancé! Ran away! A very impulsive girl! Ran away from the wedding—"

POLLY sniffed coolly. "Did you think you were marrying a used whisk-broom, or something?" Oh, she was still seething.

Then a stranger's voice was saying, "This ain't a honeymoon bureau, and I'm not a preacher. Maybe she took the Albany bus. It stopped here a minute ago. Anyway, back aside. I got a load that's due in New York."

The big motor roared, and Polly was suddenly sent sprawling. "Hey, that hurt my—" Another lurch snapped her neck. "Hot-rod. Wise guy," she said bitterly. She braced herself. "All right. Break all the records to New York. See if I care."

She began to whistle "The Wedding March," scornfully. Then tears came to her eyes. "Oh, Willy," she sobbed, "why did you have to be such a bossy bum? Such a full-time bright boy? Why can't you ever be just Willy any more?" She cried for many miles.

Finally—it seemed hours later—the truck stopped and heavy doors slid shut. She would be still as a mouse and let Hot-Rod take a long walk home. Then she'd climb out and find a cab.

At last she decided it was all right. She wrestled the trailer door open. She stopped, blinking with surprise.

The man was looking squarely at her. Then he went on kneading his hands together, making a moist thick sound. His hair was thin and reddish. His skin was drawn tight over bulging face bones. It was a nervous, restless, intense face, but most of all, Polly didn't like his eyes. They were flatly bright and furiously impatient.

"If you're hunting a bellhop, Miss McCorkle, I'm fresh out tonight."

"Oh, no. Like it says in jokes, I'm only hunting a street car. Maybe you'd tell me which way."

"Over there." He pointed to a rickety wooden chair. "Sit down."

"You heard it wrong," she said, more glibly than she felt. "I said street car. You know, clang-clang, and then good-bye."

"Sit down!" He yelled it at her, and muscles twitched all around the edge of his face. She sat. "My name is Nick," he said,

very quietly now. "I've been thinking about you."

"Oh." The word was small in the dusty stillness. She peered around. The room was dirty. A vast warehouse-type room, with oil drum and some car tools in one corner, a cot and a radio in another, and a 1948 calendar on the wall.

"Your old man said he was Judge Arthur McCorkle," Nick said. "I've heard about him. He ran for senator, and he makes all those speeches at the U.N. He's got a lot of gold. It's funny—me and you running into each other like this tonight. I've been thinking about it ever since I saw you hop out of that four-thousand-dollar convertible and sneak into my tramp. Like an answer to a dream, baby. This has got to have an angle somewhere, and I need an angle fast."

"But the angles you mean, that's trouble, Nick."

"I was born with trouble. It don't even itch any more." He paced the floor restlessly, pausing from time to time as if to listen. "An angle . . ." he was talking half to himself. "Just like a guy wandering down a street at night, hunting a place to steal a doughnut, and suddenly he sees where they left a bank door standing open."

"But, Nick," Polly argued carefully, "it would still be robbery, don't you see? And the judge would still say guilty." But he seemed not to hear. He was listening again. "Nick," she said anxiously, "I've got some money in my purse. If I promised, cross my heart, not to say anything to anybody about—"

"No, I don't want street money. I want something big and fat. And fast. My clock is running late tonight. You know something?" His eyes shone bright and flat as he looked at her. "I was waiting for that garage to quiet down. I was going to grab some money there. Then you came along, just like a dream."

"Nick, you're really going to make a mess of things if—" Polly began desperately. For suddenly she was genuinely

afraid of him. There was a wildness, an animal quality, in him.

"I already did. Stop yaking."

"No. Listen. You've got a truck. You could make a living." There must be a way to reach him, she thought. He was human. The people Polly knew were usually reasonable, usually honest, mainly decent. If something went wrong, they were sorry. "If you're in a jam, it won't help to do something worse and—"

"Shut up, baby! I never liked sermons, and I don't want one tonight! Let me think."

HIS explosive rage was like a blow, hitting her in the face. She backed away from him, stumbled against the chair and sat down clumsily. Her skirt slid above her knees. Nick stared at her. She pressed down her skirt. His eyes followed her hand as it crept back, over her breast and to her throat. The big room seemed to shrink, to grow hot and airless. And then it dawned on Polly: Nick really wasn't like anyone she'd ever met or known. She wasn't simply afraid of him. She was terrified—too terrified to make a sound, to talk, to move and remind him of her. She was afraid to breathe.

A knock at the heavy outside door broke the spell. Nick seemed almost to leap around. The knock came again. He spun back to Polly.

"Get back in the trailer. It won't do any good to yell. This guy's not looking for your kind of trouble," he said.

She scrambled into the trailer, tearing her stocking. Nick bolted the trailer door. She heard the outside door slide open and shut.

"You came back early, Nick," said a man's voice. "Nothing went wrong, did it, Nick?" The voice was soft, insistent. "Did it?"

"What makes you think it did?"

"You got back so early." There was a cautious shuffle of footsteps.

"What are you hunting for?" Nick asked.

"Nick," said the stranger, "the front fender is smashed. Did you hit something, maybe?" Again the soft insistence. "Did you?"

"What do you think I hit, Danny?" Nick's voice turned soft, too. "It sounds like you got an idea. You came over awful quick, too."

"Yes." The softness disappeared. "Dobie phoned me from Stamford just now. He said you hadn't got there with the television sets."

"Did he say anything else?"

"That the cops and troopers were all in a sweat around there. He said," went on the stranger quietly, "that a state trooper tried to check a truck. The trooper pulled up in front of the truck. He got out. A guy was closing his fruit stand across the highway; he saw it. He says the truck started up suddenly. It cut in, pinning the trooper against his sedan, and it dumped the sedan into the ditch. The trooper was dead when they got there."

"That's too bad about the trooper."

"The fruit-stand guy didn't get the truck number. He only knows it was black, kind of old, but an Eagle he thinks, and with a red stripe painted around the trailer part. So I got to wondering if you'd had any trouble up there, Nick," the man said.

"So you wondered!" Nick retorted with sudden rage. "With a lousy load of hot flicker sets, what'd you think I'd do? Get out and pin a medal on the damn trooper?"

"You killed him."

"Now I'm crying."

"Since I first got to know you," said the man, "something always told me you'd do something like this. I don't know why I ever fooled with you."

"Money, Danny, was why you fooled with me," Nick snapped.

"How true. The situation is different now. Money and murder aren't the same. I thought I'd better explain. You are now

on your own. If anybody asks, I never heard of you. My friends never heard of you. We don't want to hear of you. In short, we're out of the trucking business."

"Anything else before I say my speech?" Nick said.

"Two things: First, keep your hand out of your pocket, because my hand is already in mine. Second, you're not going to make a speech. I'm saying good-bye."

"If you think you can squeal—"

"Yes, Nick, I can. If you worry me, I will. I can tell the cops that somebody looted my appliance shop. Then I can put in a tip about the truck that killed the trooper. I have a good lawyer, Nick. And there is nothing under the sun that ever tied me into you: I always watched that, because I always had a feeling this would happen. I am a sound, respectable, property-owning citizen; an air-raid warden, an assistant scout master, and I go to church. You are a punk with two car thefts against you. You wouldn't have a chance, Nick. Good night."

THE heavy door slid shut. There were, perhaps, thirty seconds of total silence. Then Nick gave a roar that was more of a scream, like a frustrated animal. Polly heard something shatter and break. Something smashed against the trailer. Nick was in a blind rage, she sensed. He threw things. He cursed Danny. He said Danny wouldn't squeal on him. He said nobody would squeal on him, and be around for breakfast. He said a lot of things, then he stopped throwing things and an ominous quiet came. Polly breathed in thin gasps. Maybe he would forget her. Maybe he would run.

Then Nick began to talk to himself again. His voice was jerky, restless. "He'll squeal! He'll send the cops over here!!" In his tone Polly sensed something erratic, like a hysterical child. But he wasn't a child, and that was the terrifying difference. Nor was he a reasoning man. He was in the limbo of animadom. Animal made her think of

Greta, her poodle, and that made her think of home. She began to tremble. She wished, with a frightened child's yearning, to be safely home again.

Nic jerked open the door. "Hurry up. Come out of there," he said. "Tell me things. You were going to get married, in the country? Your folks have a house in the country, is that it?"

"Yes. In the country."

"They got an apartment in town here?"

"Yes. Yes, in town here." His driving words, his intense face, seemed to snatch the answers out of her frantically.

"Who's in this apartment now? Anybody? Don't lie to me!"

"No, nobody. I'm not lying, Nick, I promise—"

"They're all up in the country, servants and everybody? How long'll they stay there?"

She nodded, then shook her head. "Yes. I don't know. Don't know how long they'll stay, since I ran out. See, when I ran away—"

"I see that, I see that. But you can phone 'em and say you're coming back and for them to stay there. Come on. We're getting out of here. And something else. Look, baby." He was so close she could feel his breath on her cheek and feel the hotness of his sweating body. "See?" In his hand was a blunt revolver, and his hand was trembling. "It'll be right beside you, wherever you are, whatever you do. Now, come on."

It was black in the street, and the night was unreal with the city stillness: a poised stillness of pre-dawn, disturbed by sounds on the fringes—a subway's buried roar and the grinding of a Sanitation Department truck. It was Harlem, she realized as they passed the Polo Grounds. She'd been there to see a baseball game, long ages ago last month, in another world. Now they were hunting for a cab. They found an all-night drugstore.

Nick stopped her. "You better phone.

Phone the apartment and make sure nobody's there. If anybody answers, hang up."

She phoned while he waited at the soda fountain. She thought of calling the police, but she was afraid. Nick seemed to sense her thought. He came over to the booth and took the phone with a jerk. He listened to the endless ringing, and finally she felt him relaxing.

"Okay, let's go home," he said. The soda jerk was whistling when they went out. "Punk," Nick said, but he seemed to be feeling better. "Elevator guys or doormen at your building?" he asked.

"The doorman's only in daytime and till midnight. It's an automatic elevator," she said. They found a cab. She looked down at his hands and found herself thinking how those same hands, this very day, had turned a wheel so that a man was crushed to death. There they were. They had touched her. Willy had nice hands—strong, sunburned. Something tight filled her throat. Oh, Willy, she thought, some day remind me to tell you things. I love you, Willy. . . . She said it to herself, and it made her feel quieter inside.

THE apartment was on the top floor, on East Eighty-second Street. Dawn had come. The rooms were disordered, abandoned in the final turmoil of the wedding plans. Gift wrappings and boxes were everywhere. The rooms smelled of flowers that were gone, of powder and perfume.

Nick stood there, looking across the long living room to the terrace doors, and there was a look of hatred and loneliness on his face. "You always had it nice, didn't you, baby?"

"Nicer than I ever knew," she said sincerely.

"Now, phone 'em at the country. Tell 'em you're over your mad, and you're coming back up there. You'll be there this afternoon, say, but tell 'em to leave you alone until then. Make them believe it."

She would make them believe it. Beyond all else, she wanted them out of this. This was hers. Her own little party, and at least she would keep it that way.

Her father answered the phone. He sounded sleepless and worried: Then Willy took the phone. He must have stayed there all night, waiting for her. "Willy, I'm sorry now. Some day when he have a long long time—and if you're still talking to me—I'll try to explain how—"

"Skip it, skip it," he said in anguish. "Where are you?"

"At the apartment. I'm coming home. Wait for me there and—"

"I'll meet you in New York! We'll find a J.P. this time and—"

"Willy," she said frantically, "not yet. Wait for me there. And tell Daddy; make him wait. I'll be there, and then you'll understand. Promise me. Swear to me, Willy. I'll never ask you anything like this again."

There was a long pause. Then he said, "Any way you want it, but I love you, darling." Then his voice was gone, and again she was alone with Nick. But she didn't want to turn back to Nick.

She thought of last night, when she'd run away. All for such a good reason then—and such an empty reason, now. . . . At the last moment he'd told her: "Darling, our honeymoon has changed. It's got to be Los Angeles instead of Mexico, because a client of mine is out there and he needs to see me. You don't mind, really?"

It had annoyed her, then infuriated her, when she discovered that he had already made plane reservations for Los Angeles—without so much as a word to her. It was the last straw. She'd already changed the wedding date so it wouldn't conflict with his big law case; and she'd changed her bridesmaid list to include the insufferable daughter of his biggest client.

Suddenly, in her moment of hurt and rage, she imagined that she saw her life turning into a carbon copy of her mother's

life with her father: a life without rights, except the right to obey timidly. And she wasn't going to have it. She'd be damned if Willy could snap her around like an old rope, never telling her anything, always arranging things *his* way. A super-duper rebellion now, she thought, might be just the thing. . . .

Oh, they had said many things she and Willy. And in the end she'd flung it at him: If he wanted to marry her, he could do it her way, where and when she wanted to, or he could go roll a hoop. A rusty hoop, in fact! Then she had run away. She had run in the careless spirit of rage, in the certainty of her rightness. How long ago it seemed. And she sat there at the phone table now, thinking: Oh, Willy, just tell me next time. Los Angeles or Podunk, it wouldn't matter, if only you'd explain one little bit, that's all. . . .

"Where does your old man keep his clothes?" The question jerked her back to Nick's jungle world. She showed him her father's bedroom. He dragged out suits and held them in front of him, then threw them back on the closet floor. At last he found one that suited him. He hunted for a shirt, and when nothing pleased him at first, he dumped the dresser drawers onto the floor.

"What time is it?" His impatience, violent and erratic as a child's, had returned.

"Seven-fifteen. Only seven-fifteen," she said. She was afraid to ask why, what next.

"You've got charge accounts? At stores, I mean! Your old man's got charge accounts for you at fancy places, hasn't he?"

She nodded. "Yes. Charge accounts." His frenzy jerked the answer from her.

"Bank account?"

She nodded. "Not very big, but—"

"Get your face fixed up. Get dressed up to go shopping. You're going to buy stuff we can hock, and it's going to be good. A wedding present from your old man, tell 'em. You're going to cash checks in places where you've done it before. Good checks: three-four hundred dollars each

place. In short, we're going to make up a bankroll. I need to take a trip, and this time I'm going first class. And, baby," he said quietly, "just remember—everywhere we go, I'll be standing there with my gun."

IT WAS a beautiful morning along Fifth Avenue. They got out of the cab at Radio City. Pigeons loitered under their feet, and the sun was lush and clear. "Over there? Can you do anything over there?" Nick nodded across the street to Carvasi's, Jewelers.

"At Devore's, on the corner. I can get something there," she said tightly. He nodded. Her father's suit fitted him well. His face was shaved, his reddish hair combed.

"Get a bracelet or pin—something with diamonds," he whispered. "Remember the check."

She had come through this same door, shopping with her father, only last Tuesday. She saw Mr. Davidson, the ancient clerk who'd waited on her since she could recall. Nick drifted aimlessly up and down the aisle behind her. Mr. Davidson beamed.

He was charmed. And now she was Mrs. William Fowler, wasn't she? Yes, he had read the papers just yesterday, and it took him back. He had sold her father the engagement ring for her mother, and now . . .

He sighed, this elegant, greying little man; and Polly knew she didn't dare risk anything here. She couldn't endanger him.

Ah, a present from her father, was it to be? Mr. Davidson's eyes twinkled. Nick toyed with cigarette lighters. Click, click, click. He snapped and spun them. He was getting restless, and Polly grew panicky. She *had* to make Mr. Davidson quit chatting! She broke in, almost rudely, to say she'd take the diamond bracelet. Three thousand, plus tax. And might she cash a check, please? Charge the bracelet. . . .

On the sidewalk outside, Nick said, "Put it in my pocket. How much?"

"Three thousand for the bracelet. Four

hundred on the check," she said. "Now can't I go, Nick? Haven't I done it now?"

"Are you kidding? We're only starting." His eyes blazed. "Where's another soft touch? I want something to work with, when I get where I'm going. I'm tired of pecking with the sparrows. How about over yonder?"

It was Ancil, Inc., Watches. Polly nodded at last. A futility came over her. Nick's eyes were bright, ravenous. "Something with diamonds, again," he whispered. "Something the hock shop will like."

The walks were crowded, the traffic heavy. Nick gripped her elbow as they crossed the street. Then the strangest thing happened. She thought she saw Willy, bare-headed, his black hair wind-blown, his eyes haggard. He was staring at her from the opposite sidewalk, with an expression of dreadful anguish in his eyes.

She gasped and stopped in the middle of the street. "What's the matter?" Nick whispered harshly. Then a Fifth Avenue bus lumbered by between them, and when it passed, the mirage of Willy had vanished. She trembled, shaken clear through, and torn between the violent extremes of her wishing for Willy, and her terror at what would happen to him. But it had been only an illusion, of course. He was waiting in the country.

"What's the matter? Wake up!" Nick was shaking her savagely.

"I only . . . don't feel well," she stammered. "Please, don't—"

"Don't try anything fancy. If you take a dive or scream or something, I'll . . . By God, I'll throw you under a bus, baby." There was not the least doubt in her mind that he would.

"Buy one hell of a sweet watch in here," Nick said. But he was sweating, and his eyes were jerky. The affair in the street had alarmed him. He sauntered behind her as she went to the counter.

I've got to do something in here. I've got to. I've got to get away from him soon,

she thought frantically. He'll never just let me go. Something terrible will happen.

I'll write a message on the charge slip, she thought. "A watch, please," she said nervously. "I'm looking for something unusual. In diamonds, please." The clerk smiled. He seemed to remember her. Then she remembered him. He was the one who'd told her about his little boy. What about the little boy. Then she recalled: He'd had polio, but he was so much better now. . . .

THIS was the clerk. He was smiling.

Nick was making a tiny alarm clock strike musically—over and over and over. Polly leaned across the counter under her curly hair almost brushed the clerk's cheek.

"Please, can you somehow call the pol—" she whispered. She stopped. The clerk waited, questioningly. He didn't understand. He was the one whose little boy had polio. If anything went wrong when the police ran in, it would be her fault that . . .

"Sorry, but I didn't understand you," he said politely.

"I want," she said softly, "to cash a check, too. That's all."

"Certainly." He went away, and her knees quaked. She ran her hand across her forehead, and again the strange illusion happened. She glanced through the window, and outside on the walk was Willy. His nose was flattened against the glass. The dread anguish burned in his eyes. Then he was gone in the crowd.

Nick's fingers gnawed into her ribs, seeming to lift her erect when she sagged. "You want to get hurt bad?" he raged in a whisper. "Straighten up and fly right." He backed away.

I'm going crazy, she thought with stark simplicity.

On the sun-lit sidewalk, Nick took the watch and the money from the check. The greed glistened in his eyes again. "How about the bank where you've got money? Where is it?"

"Fifth Avenue and Forty-fourth Street."

They walked. Now the walks were more crowded as the early-lunch crowds came down from offices. She stared into every face, searching with hope against terror. But none of them was Willy. Willy was in the country, waiting for her to come home.

"Cash it as big as you can," Nick said. "These others can bounce later. It won't matter."

At the table in the bank, she dropped ink and ruined the first check. Beside her, Nick swore irritably. "Hurry up. I don't like the feeling in here."

She wrote another check. Nick looked angry. It was for seven hundred dollars. She shook her head at him helplessly. "That's all I've got, I think."

Her elbow was roughly bumped. Again the pen shed its ink, ruining this check, too. "Oh, I'm very sorry," said a voice that struck to her very soul. "How clumsy of me." He smiled at her. Willy. Her Willy, standing there so close that she could hear him breathe. "I was in a hurry, Miss," he went on. "I'm late to meet a friend."

She looked at him desperately. "Go on," she nodded, gesturing to the other pens in the rack. "It's all right. Don't wait on me, please."

Nick dug a hand into her ribs and she gasped softly. "Hurry," he whispered.

She reached for another check. Her hand shook. Beside her Willy was writing a check, too.

Make him go away. Oh, God—please make him go away, she prayed.

They finished writing at the same time. Willy stepped aside. "After you, Miss," he said. She wouldn't move. He said it again. His eyes tried to talk to her. His face was grey-white and stiff.

She began to move numbly toward the teller's window. Curiously, the space was empty. The waiting lines had vanished. Only a uniformed guard stood midway down the aisle, twirling a chain of keys.

And something was creeping over Nick's face: uneasiness, an animal alertness.

"Come back. Forget—" he began to whisper. But suddenly she couldn't see him any more. Willy had stepped in behind her, between them, and he was saying again, "After you, Miss."

She walked faster, and then Willy was thrusting her into a run. Nick let out a shout. Willy gave her a violent shove, tripping her as he did, and she went sprawling forward on the slick floor. Scarcely had she fallen before Willy came down on top of her, covering her body with his.

"Lie still," he said, and the rest of his voice was lost in the roar of guns, in a scream, in the pulsating echo of the gunfire. And then came the incredible hush, while in the streets horns honked busily and traffic went its way. Polly was afraid to move, afraid to disturb the stillness.

"It's all right now, darling," Willy said. "It's all right now."

SHE began to sob with jerking, tearless sobs. Someone was saying, "Put a newspaper over him or something." Willy picked her up and carried her into an office. She never saw Nick again.

"Willy, he was almost insane," she sobbed, clinging to him. "It was like being in a cage with something that had gone crazy."

"I know, I know," he kept saying gently. "Don't think about it now. It's all over, darling."

"How did you know? Where did you come from?"

"We went into that garage to hunt for you. The kid at the gasoline pumps said he'd seen you jump out of the car and climb into the trailer. We tried to follow the truck, but he must have switched to the side roads. We went back to the house finally, and your father was so upset he called the troopers. Practically at that mo-

(Continued on page 113)



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THE MAN

There were certain deficiencies in the Taggart Institute of Criminology's curriculum, but Jake Taggart might remedy that with three new lessons: (1) "Dealing With Impertinent Blondes," (2) "Drawing Up A Will," and (3) "The Care and Disposal of Corpses."

CHAPTER ONE

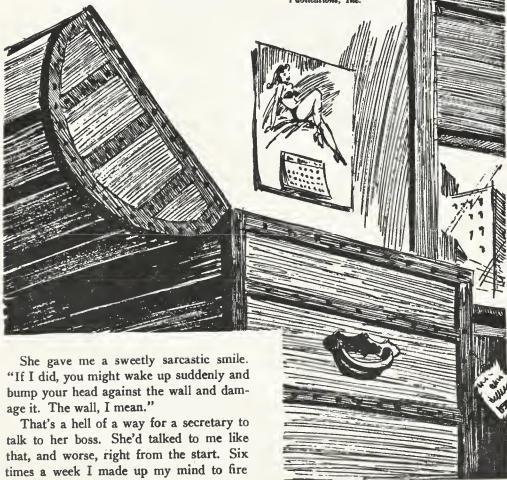
Clay Pigeon

By

**FRANK
GRUBER**

WHEN Julie came into my office I had my feet up on the desk. "You wouldn't think of knocking, would you?" I groused. "Or coughing, or something."

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She gave me a sweetly sarcastic smile. "If I did, you might wake up suddenly and bump your head against the wall and damage it. The wall, I mean."

That's a hell of a way for a secretary to talk to her boss. She'd talked to me like that, and worse, right from the start. Six times a week I made up my mind to fire

FROM MANITOBA



Julie screamed in a very loud voice. No wonder the trunk had been so heavy. . . .

her. But I never do. You can't fire a girl who's got taffy-colored hair, a figure a Fifth Avenue model would give a leg or two to own, and a face fifty percent better than any you see in a month of movies.

But it isn't right, the way Julie Conger treats me. Even if the business has fallen into my lap, it's still mine and I shell out

for her salary every week. What if I do put my feet up on the desk once in a while and catch a snore or two? Julie handles the business well enough. She can take care of almost anything that comes up.

Except this time. She said to me, "I hate to ask you to exert yourself, but this is one situation I can't handle. There's a guy outside and I can't get rid of him. Not without brass knuckles, and you took them out of my desk drawer."

"Who is he?" I asked. "A bill collector?"

"No. A scissorbill. A yap from the wilds of Manitoba who thinks this is a detective agency."

"Okay, okay," I said. "If ignorance is bliss—why make him unhappy? Take his seventeen-fifty and give him a tin badge and a diploma."

Which reminds me, I haven't introduced myself. You've seen the ad lots of times. It's in the back of the magazine and you usually come across it when you're browsing through after you've finished a story and don't know whether to start another or go to bed. The ad never changes from month to month. It always reads:

BE A DETECTIVE. EARN BIG MONEY. REWARDS. EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY. PARTICULARS FREE. WRITE TAGGART INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY, TAGGART BLDG., CHICAGO, ILL.

Well, that's me. But don't snicker. Your way of making a living may be just as dopey. Anyway, this was given to me. For years I've been like you. I'd read this ad now and then and it never inspired me at all. And then one day I got a letter from a firm of lawyers telling me that my Uncle Jake had gone to his reward and I was his sole legatee—said legacy being the Taggart Institute of Criminology.

By a coincidence, this legacy came when I was getting my mail at General Delivery and my board—well never mind; I want to forget the Madison Street missions.

SO I INHERITED a correspondence school for detectives. With it came Julie. She'd run the business for Uncle Jake. She ran it for me. And she ran me, too. There wasn't much to the business. Uncle Jake had figured it down to a system. He was good at things like that. He was the black sheep of a family that preferred spotless white wool to three square meals a day.

We ran a flock of ads in tested magazines. The inquiries were answered with form letters. A certain percentage sent the seventeen bucks and fifty cents. They got a series of booklets, lessons and literature. Eventually they got a diploma, a pair of handcuffs and a tin badge.

We get testimonial letters every year from people, thanking us for the kind of detectives we produce. (The letters come from crooks who've had dealings with Taggart graduates.)

That's the setup. Now you know why Julie was a little disconcerted by this cluck who thought we were a firm of detectives. Me, I wouldn't know a clue from a four-motored bomber.

I told Julie, "A good secretary never bothers the boss with trifles. If you can't get rid of him any other way, call a cop."

"Very well, Mr. Taggart," Julie replied to that. "I'll do as you say." So she went out and ten seconds later showed in the man from Manitoba.

Despite what Julie'd said about him he looked like any other man. He was about forty-five, medium size. The only thing unusual about him was that he was excited. And that wasn't unusual.

"Mr. Taggart," he began, "I've read your advertisements for years and I need your help. I'm in trouble and—"

"I'm sorry to hear that," I cut him off. "But you've made a little mistake. I'm not a regular detective."

"I know that," he chirped. "The chief of police of my home town is a Taggart graduate. But the trouble is I'm in too deep for

him to handle. That's why I came to you. I'm willing to pay for your *personal* services. Any reasonable amount . . ."

I don't know where he got it, because I hadn't noticed any bulges on him, but all of a sudden he yanked out a roll of greenbacks that would have choked a musk ox. He split the roll in half and planked one section down on my desk.

"Here's five thousand dollars to begin," he said.

As you know, I'm a man of a few words. The Taggart Institute of Criminology does a swell business. There's enough money comes in every week to pay Julie her fifty bucks and leave some for myself. It's good money, but there isn't enough for it.

So I waved my hand at that five grand and it jumped right into my pocket. "Sit down, sir," I said to the man from Manitoba. "You did quite right. Why hire a substitute when you can get the original? I'm glad you came to me. Tell me about this trouble."

He was certainly relieved. He'd really been afraid I wasn't going to take his five-thousand-dollar retainer. He flopped into the other chair and pulled out a blue bandanna. He ran it over his face and gave me the works.

"My name is Daniel Gilhooley and I come from Muskeg, Manitoba. That is, I've lived around there for the past four years. Since I discovered my gold mine."

"Your gold mine?" I exclaimed.

Then the telephone rang. I was glad to get a minute or two to give him another size-up. "Hello," I said absent-mindedly into the mouthpiece.

And then I came alive. "Listen, Mr. Taggart," a voice at the other end of the wire, said, "before you listen to another word from Gilhooley turn around in that swivel chair and look out the window."

I KNEW what was supposed to be behind me. A courtyard, and twenty feet on the other side, an empty office.

I turned around in the swivel chair. The courtyard was there all right. So was the office across the way. But it wasn't empty just now. The window was open and standing in front of it was a guy with a double-barreled shotgun, both barrels pointing right smack at me. That was about as close as I ever came to fainting in all my life. Maybe I would have, if the voice in the receiver hadn't spoken again.

"Be wise, Mr. Taggart. Put down the phone and step away from the window. Without saying a word to Mr. Gilhooley."

"O-o-k-kay," I said. Mr. Gilhooley was sitting a little to the left of the desk, and on account of the angle I was blocking the way—for a straight shot from across the courtyard.

I put the receiver on the hook, grinned and started to get up from my chair. As I came up I caught hold of the desk with both hands and gave it a tremendous heave, so it went over on its side, knocking over Gilhooley and his chair.

"Look out!" I yelled. At the same time I took a nose dive at the floor.

The thunderclap was the loudest I ever heard. A rainfall of glass showered the entire room. I guess the shotgun blast tore out every bit of glass in the big pane of my office window.

Buckshot smacked and rattled all around the place. One or two hit me on a ricochet and stung like the devil. The echo of it all was still roaring in my ears when I heard Julie's scream in the outer office. I knew what would happen next. She'd tear open my door and be right in line with the office across the courtyard.

I scrambled around the overturned desk on my hands and knees, catching some beautiful slivers of glass in my hands. "Stay outside, Julie!" I yelled as loud as I could.

Wham!

That was the second barrel of the shotgun. Most of it smacked into the desk and chewed it up plenty. Another buckshot hit me on a ricochet and I swore.

Then I bumped into Mr. Gilhooley. He was flat on the floor on his stomach, imitating an Indian crawling down to scalp a paleface. He was making for the door. So was I.

It opened and I yelled again, "Julie, stay out!"

But she was a smart girl. She'd opened the door from the other side, but she hadn't jumped in. Two blasts of a shotgun were enough to make her cautious.

Anyway, the door was open now. Mr. Gilhooley and myself made a two-yard dash for it on our stomachs. They'd have had to make a photo finish to discover which of us won.

It was me, though, who kicked the door shut. Mr. Gilhooley got to his feet and promptly fell into Julie's secretarial chair. He shook so hard the casters ran back and forth on the floor.

"Oh, Lord!" he moaned. "They followed me."

CHAPTER TWO

Two Many Hoods

I SIGNALLED to Julie and she jumped for the phone and hollered, "Police 1313!" before she even got the receiver off the hook.

Then I took hold of Mr. Gilhooley's shoulders. "Who are those men?" I asked. "And why did they try to kill you?"

He looked into my eyes and right through them. Perspiration was running down his face. I shook him a little. "Why did they try to kill you?"

All of a sudden he stopped shaking. And his eyes stopped on mine. "Kill me?" he asked.

"Those men who tried to kill you—who were they?"

Then he floored me. "Kill me? Oh no, they tried to kill you. I never saw them before in my life. I don't know what you're talking about I . . . good-bye."

With that he bounced out of the chair and made for the outer door. I jumped after him and caught his arm. "Wait a minute, Mr. Gilhooley. You hired me to do some investigating for you."

"No, no, no!" he chattered. "It's all a mistake." He jerked his arm out of my grip and tore open the door. When I reached the corridor he was already pounding down the stairwell. I would have gone after him but the elevator gate opened just then and a couple of cops bounced out.

"What's goin' on here?" one of them cried.

"Nothing much," I replied. "Someone tried to shoot me, that's all."

They herded me back into my office and made a lot of noise. Some more cops came, including Lieutenant McCloskey of the Detective Bureau. There was more noise and a lot of questions back and forth, and at last they all went away. The net result of it was that the cops had found two empty 12-gauge shotgun shells in the office across the way. Nothing else.

Two cops had tried to date up Julie Conger and she'd told them off. So when we were alone again Julie began on me. "Now, Sherlock Holmes, the truth. What did the man from Manitoba want?"

I pulled out the five thousand. I hadn't told the cops anything about that, or about Mr. Gilhooley. That wasn't any of their business, I figured. I had the five grand. I was willing to let Lieutenant McCloskey believe one of the Taggart Institute students had tried to assassinate the president of the school.

Julie reached for the bankroll, but I pushed her away. "Nix, you get your salary every week, don't you?"

"If you call fifty dollars a week a salary, yes. But that's past. From now on, I get seventy-five a week, plus twenty-five percent of the profits, from all sources."

"Why you little gold-digger!" I howled. "I've got a good notion to fire you."

"Go ahead," she offered. "If you think

you can run this crooked business by yourself, just go ahead and fire me. And if you do, I'll tell the cops you took five grand from a cluck under false pretenses. You're a school, not a licensed detective agency, you know."

"I didn't want to take his money," I protested. "He made me. You saw me chase after him and try to give it back, didn't you?"

"Yes—but your pursuit could have been filmed in slow motion. Well, Mr. Taggart—what now?"

YEAH, what now? I'd accepted a retainer from Gilhooley. Somebody had tried to knock him off. They'd wrecked my office. And Gilhooley had suddenly lost his memory. But I'd taken his dough. I had a little of Uncle Jake in me, but not enough. There was still too much white wool.

I said to Julie, "We've got to locate Mr. Gilhooley. He's a stranger in Chicago. He'll be checked in at a hotel. Call up the Morrison, the Palmer House and the Stevens. Ask if Mr. Gilhooley from Muskeg, Manitoba, is registered there."

Julie called the hotels. Then she got the classified directory and called eight or ten more hotels. Mr. Gilhooley wasn't registered at any of them.

"There are five thousand hotels in Chicago," she complained. "We can't call all of them."

"You only have to call the big ones," I told her. "Gilhooley'll be at one of them: He's a millionaire. He told me he owns a gold mine in Manitoba."

"A gold mine? Well, why didn't you say so?" She pawed through the phone book again and made one more call. "Is Mr. Daniel Gilhooley of Muskeg, Manitoba registered there?" she asked. Then, "He is? . . . Thank you. I'll call later."

I goggled at her. "You got his hotel? How'd you know where to call?"

"You're supposed to be a detective, aren't you?" she sneered at me. "Well, you saw

what Mr. Gilhooley looked like, didn't you? All right, I called the big hotels. He'd have been staying at one of them if he'd been as poor as he looked. But he owned a gold mine, so—I called the YMCA hotel. Guys who look like Gilhooley and own gold mines always stay at the YMCA."

The logic of that fool girl. But she'd been right. There wasn't any sarcastic comeback I could make to her.

She went on: "All right, now, do your stuff. He isn't in at the moment, but he'll show up at the Y sooner or later. Go down there and wait for him."

I got my hat. I also got a pair of the handcuffs that we give to graduates and which we buy at twenty dollars a gross. "A detective ought to have a gun," I said to Julie. "Especially when he's almost been assassinated."

"If you had a gun you'd probably shoot yourself," Julie told me. "You're better off without one. Go on, detect. If you get all balled up, give me a ring and I'll straighten you out."

I left the office. I got in a taxi outside and made the driver go by Canal Street so I could see all the drifters sitting along the curb from Madison to Adams. I just wanted to remind myself that I'd been with those boys only a little while ago and if things didn't go right I'd probably be with them again one of these days.

I asked at the Y if Mr. Gilhooley had got in yet. He hadn't. So I got a *Christian Science Monitor* from the newspaper rack and plopped myself down in one of the leather chairs in the lobby.

About ten minutes later a man sat down in the chair next mine. "Nice day," he said.

"Is it?" I said.

"I think it is," he retorted. "And look, Mr. Taggart . . ."

He knew my name. I looked. He was holding a brown paper sack of the kind you get your groceries in. He was holding the sack with his left hand and his right was in the sack up to his wrist. "You know what

"I'm holding inside this sack?" he said.

"B-Bananas?" I asked hopefully.

His lips skinned back. "Uh-uh," he said, "it ain't bananas. It's black and it can make noise. And now that we understand each other, would you kindly get up and walk quietly out of here—or would you want me to spread you out in this nice YMCA?"

I put down the *Christian Science Monitor* and walked out, the fellow right behind me, and when we got outside he tapped me with the paper bag. He hadn't been fooling. There was something hard in that sack, all right.

There was a nice car at the curb, with a man behind the wheel. "In the back," said the chap with the paper sack.

I climbed into the back of the car and he came in after me. He poked the paper bag—and what was in it—into my ribs. "All right, Lester," he said to his pal in front.

The car leaped away from the curb. Lester drove south to Roosevelt Road, then turned west over all the railroad tracks. At Blue Island Avenue, he turned southwest.

After we were going a while on Blue Island the chap with the gun in the bag said to me, "Now, Mr. Taggart, tell me, what did Dan Gilhooley tell you?"

"Nothing," I replied quickly. "Nothing at all. He came into my place thinking I was a private detective—"

"Aren't you?"

"Naw. I run a correspondence detective school. I only inherited it a month ago from my uncle. The Taggart School of Criminology."

"I've seen the ads," he said. "So you teach guys to be detectives and you're not a detective yourself? Sounds screwy."

"I know—but that's the way it is. You know, you don't have to be a politician to tell the president how to run this country. Anyone can do that."

He snorted. "You know what I think, Taggart? I think you're a damn crook. How much do these people pay you to learn to be a detective?"

"Seventeen dollars and fifty cents. With that they get a diploma and a badge and a pair of handcuffs."

"It's a gyp. You must make a lot of coin."

"Uh-uh, there's a big overhead in this business. We spend over a thousand bucks a month advertising. An inquiry costs us over a dollar, you know."

"And how many suckers do you get from a thousand inquiries?"

"Uh—about one in twelve."

HE FIGURED that out. I could almost hear the wheels going around in his head. "So if an inquiry costs you a dollar and one out of twelve sends you the seventeen-fifty you make about five-fifty profit, huh?"

"Oh, no. You see, there's a heavy overhead. Form letters, follow-ups to get the suck—the students, lessons, etc. An enrollment, according to our figures, costs us fourteen dollars before we get the dough. Then the lessons, the badge and the diploma—well, that brings the total up to fourteen-fifty. I make three dollars clear on every detective I turn out."

The guy beside me chuckled. "Hear that, Lester? And you thought *we* were crooks?"

"Maybe we ought to muscle in on this racket, Gus," Lester called back.

"If we had the time, maybe we would. Well, Taggart, you don't look like such a bag egg. But you hadn't ought to mixed into things that weren't any of your business. This Gilhooley thing, f'rinstance."

"I didn't mix into that," I protested. "I never saw the man before today. He came into my office, gave me some dough and . . ." I almost bit my tongue off.

"He gave you some dough?" Gus piped up. He slapped my pants pocket. And, of course, the roll was in that pocket.

He stuffed it in his coat pocket. "Expense money. All right, go on, what else did Gilhooley tell you?"

"He didn't have time to tell me more. You ought to know that. You were right behind him and not more than two or three minutes could have elapsed between the time you saw him go into my office and you were next door, across the courtyard."

"Yeah, that's right," admitted Gus. "We got in there with our golf bag just when he was planking down the money. But he must have told you something. Otherwise, how'd you know he was staying at the YMCA hotel?"

"I guessed that," I said. "My secretary called up eight or ten hotels, then I got to figuring and thought he was just the type who'd go to the Y. One of those millionaires who got rich by pinching nickels."

Gus looked me over. After a minute he said, "What do you think, Lester?"

Lester turned his head and grunted. "He does look pretty dumb, Gus."

"Umm," said Gus. He took the paper sack away from the gun he'd had in his mitt all this while. He showed me the gun. It's a .38 automatic.

"Taggart, you know from that shotgun stuff that we mean business. Now, you look like a nice guy. We'd hate to have to rub you out. So forget that you ever saw Lester and me, forget there's a guy like Daniel Gilhooley in the United States. Do you think you could do that?"

"Yes, I certainly could. But what about the five grand?"

Gus grinned at me. Then he slammed the barrel of the automatic against my jaw. He put plenty behind it. I didn't go out, but I went back against the cushions and began reaching for clouds. Before I could catch any of them, Gus opened the door.

I saw the pavement jumping up at me, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. I caught it on my face. And then, for a minute, I went out.

A COP rolled me over on my back and was looking down at me. I noticed he had a wart on his chin, and then I felt nee-

dles and things shooting all through my skull.

"What happened to you, buddy?" the cop asked.

"Uh—I was walking across the street and I guess I fainted," I told him.

"Fainted? Somebody said you was thrown out of a car."

I tried to climb to my feet and after a while managed it. "Naw," I said, "there was a car passing just then. It came kind of close to me. I—I guess that's what made me faint. I'm all right now."

"Sure?"

I felt my bones all over. "I guess I'm all right. Thanks, officer, for picking me up." He hadn't picked me up, but I didn't mind letting him feel like a hero.

I got away and discovered I was out on Ninety-first Street. It cost me a dollar eighty-five to get back to the Loop and my office. Julie jumped up from her chair when I opened the office door and for a moment I thought she was almost glad to see me.

But then she lit into me again. "Where've you been, you big palooka?"

"Detecting," I replied.

She looked me over. "My guess is that you've been rolling in a gutter. You got the bum's rush out of a saloon and you landed on your face, huh?"

That was one thing about Julie. She was consistent. She always thought the worst about me, not good one day and bad another, like some girls.

"All right," I said, "I was down at the Y—"

"Oh yeah?" she cut me off. "It may interest you to know that Mr. Gilhooley telephoned fifteen minutes ago."

"From where?"

She shrugged. "He wouldn't say. He was too excited to talk. He's going to call back."

"That's fine," I said. "He evidently wants me to continue with the case. In which event I'll either get knocked off by

those playful lads or get some more dough from Gilhooley."

"Speaking of money," Julie said, a glint coming into her eyes. "You got away from here with that roll. Shell out, boss, shell out."

I groaned. "So you still think I got this face from a saloon bouncer? Well, I didn't. The two duck hunters picked me up. They took the retainer from me and tossed me out of a moving car—away out in Blue Island."

Without a word Julie came up to me and slapped my pockets. Then she exploded. "You stupid idiot! You need a guardian to—"

Fortunately the phone on her desk rang at that moment. She grabbed it up. "Taggart Institute of Criminology. . . Mr. Gilhooley? Just a moment, please. Mr. Taggart has just come in."

She gave me a scornful look and handed me the phone. Gilhooley was twice as excited as he'd been when he left the office on a try for the sprinting record.

"Mr. Taggart?" he cried. "I've just discovered that Tom Factor's in town. He's the man I told you about—who's been after me. You've got to stop him—get him out of the way. Eliminate him."

"Yes, yes," I cut in. "But where's he staying? How'll I know him?"

"He's a big roughneck. I saw him going into the Mirabeau. Mr. Taggart, I'm absolutely counting on you to get him. If you don't I'm sunk—ruined. If he finds me he'll kill me."

"Where are you now, Mr. Gilhooley?" I asked. "I want to see you. I had some trouble with those men who tried to kill you in my office. Gus and Lester. . ."

"No!" he howled. "Them! I—I don't dare tell you where I'm staying. I'll telephone you later. But get Factor. . . Understand?"

"Yes, sure, but listen, Gilhooley—" I stopped. He'd hung up on me. I threw the phone at Julie. "Quick—have that call traced."

CHAPTER THREE

Trouble by Proxy

SHE tried, but it wasn't any good. Gilhooley had called from a pay station. "I think," I said aloud, more to myself than to Julie, "this is beginning to be a bit of a headache. I wish I knew what it was all about."

"Do I have to tell you that, too?" snapped Julie. She snatched up a newspaper from her desk and poked it in my face. I started to turn a page and she yelled at me, "No, you boob! Right there on the financial page. Gilhooley owns a gold mine, doesn't he?"

I'd almost forgotten that. With her tip-off I found the item, almost buried in a column of similar stuff. It read:

GILHOOLEY PRODUCTION UP

Gold production at Gilhooley Mines, Muskeg, Manitoba, was up eight percent over last month, according to Tom Factor, vice president in charge of production. . .

Now I began to see daylight. Gilhooley Mines was a corporation. Daniel Gilhooley had discovered the claim, but naturally he'd required outside capital to work it. In the resulting corporation he was only one of many stockholders. Tom Factor was another . . . and for some reason was gunning for Gilhooley.

The door of our office opened and an expressman came in. "Trunk for Mr. Taggart," he said.

"For me? I didn't buy any trunk."

He didn't pay any attention to me. He reached back into the corridor and hauled in the trunk. The way he handled it, I knew it was heavy. I stepped over to look at the tag on the trunk. It was addressed to me all right, care of the Institute.

"This is screwy," I said to the expressman. "No one would be sending me a trunk. If you think I'm going to pay any expressage—"

"It's prepaid. Sign here."

I signed and he left. I kicked the trunk. It gave off a dull sound, and Julie came over. "Maybe it's some of your Uncle Jake's stuff. Open it up and see."

"With what? Can't you see it's locked?"

She gave me another dirty look. Then she went to her desk and got two things, a nail file and a small pamphlet. She handed me the letter. "It's your own stuff. Read it. It tells how to open locks."

It was Lesson Number 14. But before I'd read more than a paragraph of it, Julie had the lock open. She unsnapped the spring fasteners and yanked at the trunk lid.

She screamed then in a very loud voice and fell back into my arms. I'd caught a glimpse of what was in the trunk before the lid fell back. I sat Julie in a chair and got her a glass of water. She hadn't fainted but she was pretty white.

"Thanks," she said, the first kind word she'd ever spoken to me.

"I'll call the cops," I volunteered.

LIEUTENANT McCLOSKEY came again. He was tough this time. "This is carrying things pretty far. In the morning, someone tries to shoot you—in the afternoon, you've got a corpse in a trunk. Talk, mister, talk."

"You know as much as I do, Lieutenant . . ." I began.

"More!" he snapped. "Go on."

"I don't know anything. I just inherited this business a month ago. I've been running it quietly, legitimately—"

"Legitimately, hell!" snorted the lieutenant. "One of these days the Post Office Department is going to get after you."

Julie butted in at that. "They've already investigated the Taggart Institute and given us a clean bill of health. We're as legitimate as any correspondence school. Practically so. Taggart Institute graduates can become detectives anywhere, provided they pass the usual civil service examinations."

"Yah!" snorted McCloskey. I took a sudden dislike to the flatfoot. Maybe Julie

bawled me out now and then, but that was in the family, so to speak. She was loyal to the school, anyway.

The medical examiner came and shooed us all into my private office, still littered with broken glass and buckshot. McCloskey gave me a verbal third degree. It didn't do him any good, though. I always came back with: "If I'd killed a man would I be foolish enough to put the body in a trunk and then call the cops?"

After a while, the M. E. poked his head into the room. "He was killed by being struck with a blunt instrument. His entire head was smashed in. Here's some papers I found on him."

I tried to edge around to get a look at the papers but McCloskey backed away. He examined them himself, though. When he finished he grunted. "Ever hear of a place called Muskeg, Manitoba?"

Of course I'd already connected this with the other things, so I'd been half expecting some such question. I shook my head. "Only muskeg I ever heard of is the muskeg swamp in Minnesota."

"They have muskeg in Canada, too," he grunted. He put the papers in his pockets, started to turn away then whirled back. "Ever hear of a guy named Marcus Watt?" he barked.

I hadn't. So my face didn't give me away, as McCloskey had expected with his act. "Uh-uh," I said. "Mr. Watt's a stranger to me."

But the minute they were gone—with the trunk—I said to Julie, "This is big stuff—and big dough. I'm off to see Mr. Thomas Factor. I want to ask him about a Marcus Watt."

For once she didn't have any words. I was surprised at that. More so when she followed me out to the hall. There she finally spoke. "B-Be careful, Jake," she said softly.

I didn't even remind her that I didn't like the name Jake. I called myself Jack Taggart.

THE Mirabeau was only three blocks from the office. I walked there in three minutes flat. Tom Factor of Muskeg, Manitoba, was registered. And what's more, his key wasn't in the mailbox. When I asked if Mr. Factor was in, the clerk ran his hand over the rows of pigeonholes and stopped at one numbered 2210.

So I rode up to the twenty-second floor and knocked on the door of 2210. "Come in!" someone yelled from inside. The door wasn't locked.

I went in. Tom Factor was even bigger than Gilhooley had intimidated. He weighed only a few pounds less than a Mack truck. He had a long, black beard.

"Who're you?" he asked, in a voice that shook the pictures on the wall.

"Jack Taggart's the name," I said. "I'm the president of the Taggart Institute of Criminology."

"A detective?" he roared.

I didn't say yes and I didn't say no. I shrugged. "I'm here on behalf of Mr. Daniel Gilhooley."

He didn't roar this time. He showed his teeth and made a noise way down in his throat. "Gilhooley, the squirt. So he's holering copper, huh. I'll fix the runt!"

"That's the hell of it," I interrupted. "You won't. Mr. Gilhooley hired me to protect him from you. You're in Chicago now, not Manitoba. You can't go shooting people here with shotguns."

I stopped. The shotgun stuff hadn't made any impression on him. At least, not that I could see. I made it clearer. "You know, of course, that your two stooges, Les and Gus, tried to shoot Mr. Gil—"

"Lester Garry and Gus Gunderson?" he snapped. "What do you mean *my* stooges?"

"Aren't they?"

"Hell, no. They're stockholders themselves. They're trying to beat me to the proxies, just like Gilhooley." He stopped, realizing he was spilling too much. It was too late, though. I'm not as dumb as Julie Conger tried to make me believe, at times.

It was all clear to me now. "So there're three of you after the proxies?" I said. I put the tips of my right-hand fingers against the tips of my left hand and looked very casual. Then I tossed in my aces.

"Marcus Watt's proxies, huh?"

I scored. His eyes popped wide open. "What do you know about Marcus Watt? Gilhooley tell you?"

"No. Mr. Watt came to my office." I didn't tell how he had come. But it got him just the same. He made a sudden jump at me and gathered a handful of my coat and shirt in his big fist. "That's a lie!" he boomed. "Watt's not in Chicago—or is he?"

I tried to get out of his clutch, but was unsuccessful. "He most certainly is," I told him. "And let go, you big lummox."

I don't think it was the name I called him that made him let me go. He did, though, and he took a quick turn around the floor, muttering, "He's been giving me a runaround."

"Watt?" I asked.

He stopped and glared at me. "Watt—or Gilhooley. For two days I tried to get this Watt and they told me he was in New York."

"Maybe you didn't try the right place," I said. "Did you try his home on Sheridan Road?"

"Sheridan Road? He lives on Foster. He tell you he lives on Sheridan Road?"

"Uh-uh," I said backing away. "I—I was just making a guess. I didn't know where he lived."

His mouth fell open. "Why, you . . ." he began.

By that time I was yanking open the door. He came after me, but I didn't stop for him. He was big, but size doesn't count in running. I was on the nineteenth floor by the time he reached the stairwell.

I didn't stop until the fifteenth. And I wouldn't have then if I hadn't seen a hotel guest standing before the elevators and a red light overhead.

DOWNSTAIRS, I went to the telephone booths. Factor had told the truth. Marcus Watt's address was listed on Foster Avenue. I went into the booth and called my office.

"The boss talking," I told Julie.

"Yeah?" she said. "Well, Mr. Gilhooley just telephoned again."

That was why I'd phoned the office. "He say what he wanted?"

"He didn't say, but I told him a big trunk had come to the office and he threw cat-fits. Jake . . . I didn't tell him what was in the trunk, but he seemed to guess. You s'pose . . ."

"I don't know, Julie, but between you and me, it's a fifty-fifty chance Mr. Gilhooley was responsible for sending that trunk to the office. I sprung it on Tom Factor and he didn't make the right answers. So, I dunno . . ."

"Well, you better find out. The cops will have traced the trunk through the expressman by this time. If Gilhooley's that kind of man, we don't want anything to do with him."

"We?" I asked sarcastically.

She said some words, but I didn't hear all of them because I hung up. I looked up the number of the Detective Bureau and put in a call. "Lieutenant McCloskey around the place?" I asked.

He was, but his voice didn't sound very happy when he got on the wire. "Look here, Taggart, I'm not satisfied with your story at all. I checked with the express company and they claim they never delivered a trunk to you."

"But they did!" I yelled. "You saw the trunk yourself."

"Yeah—but I didn't see any expressman lug it up to your office. Now look, Taggart, where are you right now?"

At that point, I left him. He was stalling, while someone at the station house was having the call traced.

I didn't like things. They were getting complicated. The five-thousand-dollar re-

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tainer that morning had looked fine, but I didn't have it any more. And since Daniel Gilhooley of Muskeg, Manitoba, had stepped into my office, I'd been shot at with a shotgun and I'd been taken for a ride and thrown out of a car. A dead man had also been dumped into my office and now to climax it all, I stood a marvelous chance of being arrested.

I went across the street to a drugstore and called the office again. "Look, Julie—" I began.

"Mr. Cretzmeyer?" she interrupted. "Yes, your lessons are being mailed to you today."

"There's a cop in the office, Julie?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied. "Just continue the good work, Mr. Cretzmeyer, and you won't have any trouble graduating at all. We'd like to hear from you again soon."

"All right, Julie, I get it. I just called to tell you that the cops are after me. Stick around the office until I call again."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Cretzmeyer," Julie said.

I hung up. McCloskey seemed to want me bad. He'd rushed a cop to the office. He'd probably keep him there, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Big Drop

I CAME out of the drugstore cursing Daniel Gilhooley eighteen ways. Why the hell did he keep calling my office, if he refused to give me anything to go on? And why did he want a detective to begin with? If he'd killed Marcus Watt he didn't need a detective. Not much. He needed a good criminal lawyer. Or a train back to Muskeg, Manitoba.

Manitoba. That was where all this had begun. At the headquarters of the Gilhooley Mines. And that was where it would end.

There was a westbound Madison Street

car waiting for the traffic signal. I jumped aboard just before the doors closed. Five minutes later I dropped off in front of the Northwest Depot.

I went inside to the information booth. "Can you tell me about the trains to Winnipeg?" I asked.

The clerk consulted a timetable. "The train for Duluth leaves at five-thirty. That gets you there in the morning at eight-thirty. The Winnipeg train leaves in the afternoon."

That meant it was really a two-day trip to Winnipeg. And if my dim memory wasn't failing me, trains north of Winnipeg ran only now and then. I could count on a three-day trip to Muskeg, Manitoba. And possibly four or five. Too slow.

Maybe if I'd been a regular detective I'd have stuck to the facts in the case. They added up. But I didn't like the sum of the addition. It left Jake Taggart right smack in the center of the mudpile. So I thought of this and that, and came out and hopped a taxi.

Foster Avenue is in the neighborhood of seven miles from Madison Street. I was around Irving Park when I took a gander at the meter and almost got heart failure. I'd been spending money pretty fast today and with the income from the Taggart Institute what it was I hadn't gotten accustomed to carrying large amounts with me. I dug the bankroll out of my pocket and discovered I had \$2.40 with me.

"Stop at the next corner, buddy," I said to the driver.

"What for? It ain't Foster."

"I changed my mind. I want to get out here."

I gave him a nickel tip and had forty cents left over. I continued to Foster on the street car. The address I had on Marcus Watt turned out to be a one-story brick bungalow. I walked up to the front door and leaned on the bell.

A rather plump woman of about thirty opened the door. I assumed the expression

of an undertaker. "Mrs. Watt," I said, "I know this is a sad occasion for you, but perhaps it will be a relief to you to know that the insurance company intends to make a prompt settlement. . . ."

"What insurance company?" the woman asked.

I was making it up as I went along so I popped out the first name that came into my head. "Why the Central Mutual. Uh—Mr. Watt had other insurance?"

"Yes, he did. Would you mind waiting a moment? I want to see if I can find his Central Mutual policy." She turned away.

She did it pretty well, but I'd come here with a screwy idea and the moment I'd looked at her face when she opened the door my pulses began pounding. She was living here at Marcus Watt's address. She could be his sister, but was probably his wife. The police had identified the body in the trunk. Unquestionably they'd notified her. Yet her eyes were neither red or puffed. She had shed no tears.

WHEN she returned shaking her head I was already backing away from the door. It was the luckiest thing I ever did in my life.

Because my old friend Lester came out of that door like a football tackle. He missed me by inches and then I did a standing broadjump to the sidewalk. I landed running, with Lester after me.

He had practically no chance of catching me. The only reason he was running after me was to kill me. Me, I was trying to prevent being killed. There's a difference. A deer couldn't have caught me the way I was going.

Lester gave up the chase in the second block, but just to be on the safe side I went on another. Then I turned a corner and dropped to a walk. I walked four or five blocks until I caught my breath. Then I saw a clock in a drugstore window and went inside and called the office again.

"Mr. Kleinfelter calling," I told Julie.

"Listen, I need a hundred dollars and I need it bad."

"Yes, Mr. Kleinfelter," Julie came back at me. "We sent you a notice that your next payment was a week overdue. We're short of funds ourselves."

"I know that," I said. "I've got forty cents and I have to go to Manitoba. It's important, Julie. See how much money you can scrape up, and meet me in an hour in front of the information desk in the Northwestern Depot. And be sure you shake whatever cops are hanging around. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Kleinfelter. We'd appreciate your remittance."

It took me almost another hour to get back to the Northwestern Depot. I wasted another nickel calling the airport and getting plane schedules and then hung around the information booth.

The hour I'd given her was up, but Julie didn't come. I waited fifteen minutes. No Julie. I knew it was after bank hours and couldn't imagine where Julie would raise a hundred dollars, but somehow I had faith in Julie. She was the most capable girl I've ever known. If it wasn't for her sarcastic tongue, her always wanting to boss me . . .

And then there she was, moving as if she was going to a fire. "I couldn't shake him!" she cried when she was still twenty feet away.

I saw the gumshoe another twenty feet behind her and I said a couple of words that caused a couple of people to stare. Then all of a sudden we were all running together. Me to Julie and the dick to both of us.

It was like taking the stick in a relay race. I got the handful of bills from Julie on the fly and I kept on going.

This dick was young and pretty good. He gained on me and would have caught me at the door except that I suddenly swerved away and knocked over a redcap carrying four or five bags. The bags flew in all directions and the dick went down

over one of them. That gave me my chance. Outside, I caught a cab.

"The airport and don't spare the horses!" I told him.

It was a nice haul for the cabby and he cooperated with me. But it wasn't until we were taking the long roll down Archer Avenue that I felt easy. I'd really lost the dick.

I COUNTED the money Julie had given me. There was \$94 in the roll. Fourteen dollars of it was in singles. That meant she'd had a hard time getting the money. But she *had* gotten it.

There was a plane at the end of the canopy in the airport, but I kept away from it. I bought a ticket to Duluth and went into the washroom. I stayed in there twenty minutes, then came out and looked at the wall clock.

The loudspeaker was calling out, "Duluth plane leaves in two minutes." I ducked back into the washroom, counted seconds. When I figured that ninety of them had passed I came out on the run. They were just about to close the door of the cabin plane.

I didn't yell. I saw the guy standing next to the plane and I just ran. I dove under his arm and slammed into the plane. I jerked the door shut behind me. The hostess inside the door sort of gasped, but then the plane was rolling.

I grinned at the pretty girl in the uniform. "Almost missed it—" and then I stopped.

Tom Factor, looking like a grizzly bear on the small seat, was scowling at me. And then I saw another familiar face—no, two more. Lester and Gus.

Lester got up. A big automatic jumped into his hand. "This is the third time," he said.

But Tom Factor stopped him. "No, Lester—we can't risk it. Go up front and take care of the pilots."

The hostess was a game kid. She was

white-faced, but she tried to stop Lester from going up into the pilots' compartment. He brushed her to one side.

Beside these three lads there were two other passengers in the plane, both men. They shrank down into their seats, goggle-eyed. Gus brought out a cannon and moved to the rear end of the plane where he could cover everyone in the cabin.

Then big Tom Factor got up, stooping. "So you couldn't let well enough alone, huh?"

"You mean the frame you worked on me? I was willing enough to let it alone—but the cops weren't."

"They wouldn't have convicted you. They'd have kept you in jail a few days and then turned you loose."

"Maybe, but I read in the newspapers once where a man confessed a killing for which someone else got hung. Anyway, Factor—Dan Gilhooley hired me to do a job and your hoodlums took the fee from me and killed Gilhooley. That makes me out a pretty big chump. The least I could do is get Gilhooley's killers. . . ."

Tom Factor didn't like that. "Gilhooley isn't dead. It's Marcus Watt who—"

"Uh-uh. I don't know where Watt is, but I imagine you paid him plenty to disappear for a while. You want the police to believe that Gilhooley killed Watt and then lit out. Actually you killed Gilhooley and put some of Watt's letters and things in his pocket. Then you tried to throw me off the track by repeatedly phoning my office and disguising your voice. Maybe you figured the cops would hear one or two of your phone talks."

Factor snorted. "All right, Taggart. Maybe I underestimated you. Watt's proxies were enough for Gilhooley to control the director's meeting. But they weren't enough for me, because I haven't got as much stock as he had. But with Gilhooley unable to vote his stock, mine and Watt's is enough to swing the business. It's a good gold mine, Taggart. Too damn good to let a

smart-aleck dick like yourself spoil it. So—now I've got to figure out some way of wrecking the plane without killing me and the boys."

FACTOR began slapping my pockets and he didn't pull his punches any. "It's your own fault. If you hadn't come on this plane nothing would have happened. Now a lot of innocent people are going to get killed.

"You can't get away with it, Factor," I told him. "That guy I knocked over when I jumped into the plane was a cop. He's telephoning up north by now."

"That's fine. Then when they find the plane with some dead people in it, they'll figure it was *you* who made it drop. To the cops, you're a criminal. . . . Ha, what's this?"

He rought out my mail-order handcuffs. "Real detective, huh?" he snorted. He frisked me again and didn't find a key for the handcuffs. He grabbed my wrists and put them in the cuffs and snapped them together. "These'll keep you quiet for a while. Sit down now, while I think things over."

Well, there wasn't anything else I could do *but* sit. Factor went back to his own place and gave an imitation of The Thinker. After a while Lester opened the door of the pilots' compartment.

"Can you beat it, Tom? The radio just went out of order."

"That's a coincidence," grunted Factor. "But you better stay up front with the boys to see they don't take us to the wrong place. Tell 'em to keep her headed for Duluth. I'm figuring something out."

He figured for about ten minutes. You could almost hear the wheels going around in his head. I figured out what to do long before he did.

"Parachutes," he finally said. "We'll fix the plane so it'll crash and then we'll jump off with parachutes."

"Passenger planes don't carry parachutes," cut in the hostess.

"What?" exclaimed Factor.

"Passengers wouldn't know how to use them anyway and they'd lose their heads and jeopardize the chances of bringing the



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plane to a safe landing. So—no 'chutes."

Lester came out of the pilots' compartment just then and let out a yell. "She's lying, Tom. There's a parachute up here in front."

"That's the only one, though," the hostess said quickly.

"Yeah? Well, take a look around, Lester."

He did, but the single parachute up front was all there was on the plane. It was enough though for Factor. "All right, Lester, we'll land and Gus and me'll get off. You come back with the plane, fix things and then jump."

"Why me?" scowled Lester. "Why not you or Gus?"

"For five hundred extra, I'll do it," volunteered Gus. "I jumped a couple of times up in Saskatchewan. I knew a fella there owned a plane."

"That's a deal, Gus. All right, Lester, go up and have them land. Pick a big open field, with no houses around."

Lester went back and in a few minutes the plane began dropping down to the ground. I looked out of the window and saw a smooth cow pasture rushing to meet us. I knew we were over Wisconsin by this time and I knew too that the country here was so flat and smooth you could land almost anywhere.

I FELT only a little bump when the wheels hit the ground. After a minute the plane came to a stop. Factor looked around and ripped a section of steel railing from one of the seats. "We better not shoot them," he said, "but if their heads are caved in, well—that could have happened when the plane fell." He looked at me and showed his teeth. "It'll be a particular pleasure to cave in *your* head."

I ducked away from him and backed toward the front of the plane, where Lester was standing with his gun.

Lester poked at me with his gun. "G'wan, get back!"

Then I reached out and grabbed the gun out of his hand. I never saw a man look so surprised in my life. He'd seen the handcuffs on my wrists, figured I was safe.

Maybe *you're* not surprised though. I've told you about these handcuffs we give our graduates. We buy them at twenty bucks a gross. Well, what can you expect in a handcuff costing around fourteen cents wholesale? A lot of shiny stuff that looks all right from a distance, but wouldn't hold a crook more than two seconds. While Tom Factor had been figuring out his wholesale murder scheme I'd twisted and worked on the cuffs. And when I jumped up and backed toward Lester, my wrists were free, even though I was still holding them as if they were cuffed.

Lester's mouth was wide open and it made a target at which to shoot. I didn't see him fall, though. I was too busy whirling around, trying to get Gus at the other end of the cabin. I got him all right, but it took two bullets and he let one slam at me that took some skin off my left arm.

By that time Tom Factor was on me swinging that length of railing. I let him have one right in his big chest, which hardly staggered him. But the next bullet got him square in the Adam's apple.

And then suddenly I was very sick. I lost interest in things around me. Something one of the pilots said brought me back. "This is Wisconsin—we'll have to notify the local authorities. . . ."

"No," I said. "Go back to Chicago."

"You're a policeman?" the pilot asked.

I didn't say I was and I didn't say I wasn't. I just flicked my coat back and gave him a quick look at one of the Taggart Institute tin badges.

It was enough. Five minutes later we were in the air again, flying south, and I was thinking about Julie Conger. Not a bad dame at all. Now that she knew what a smart detective I was, chances were her attitude toward me would become a little more respectful. Chances were. ♦ ♦ ♦

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By JAKOBSSON and WAGGENER



In the strangest reversal of roles on record, D.A. Francis Collins of Martinez, Cal., recently went all out for the acquittal of a confessed murderer who couldn't admit his own innocence. When they arrested Kenneth Long for wife-murder, he didn't seem to have a shadow of a chance—he even supposed himself guilty. Then they gave him a shot of truth serum—and in his drug-induced trauma, he described how another man had killed Mrs. Long before his eyes. The shock of the experience had afterwards induced in him a partial amnesia.

When a jury voted to acquit him, no one was more surprised at the verdict than Kenneth Long.

About fifteen years ago in Dayton, Ohio, a lonely little guy went in for crime and made a surprising success at it. For the first time in his life, after a few well-planned holdups, soda-jerk George Colley found himself with a spare dollar or two in his pocket. But it was still a big world, and he still was an unnoticed little guy. So he named himself the Candy Kid and started leaving notes to police at the scene of each job. Such as: CATCH ME IF YOU CAN—THE CANDY KID.

He even got his name in the papers that way. But not always on the front page. So he shot an average citizen named Henry Miller, and then both Henry and he were on Page 1 for a while. An aroused law tracked him down in earnest, arrested him. But various technicalities held up his trial for five years.

When he was finally sentenced to life Imprisonment, it only made Page 15.



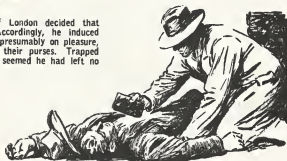
r, Edwin D. Young, forger, committed a murder in the heat of anger and had to flee Ohio. Assuming a new identity, he forced himself into honest work and to his amazement discovered himself saving money and living well, for the first time in his life.

But within a year, Ohio police had found him out, sent him to jail for life. He had revealed himself when he passed one more bad check, for a trifling amount, in spite of the considerable savings he had in the bank. When asked why he had risked his liberty for almost nothing, he said he had had to do it.

He had to see, he said, if he still could pass a check. If he had lost the knack, he would have lost his sense of security forever. He is now secure.

Back in the giddy Nineties, John Birchall of London decided that murder was one way of getting rich quick. Accordingly, he induced wealthy young men to travel with him to Canada, presumably on pleasure, where he quietly did away with them and took their purses. Trapped in Ontario, he was tried and hanged. At first, it seemed he had left no estate and had been a failure even at crime.

But one man got rich quick on Birchall's scheme. He was J. R. R. Radcliffe, honest public executioner. After hanging Birchall, he retrieved the rope, cut it into one-inch lengths and sold them for souvenirs. Such was the publicity Birchall had enjoyed that not one strand was left unsold.



Kenwood looked inside. He took what he saw like a low blow. . . .



Come On - A My Funeral!

"I'm gonna give you everything," the curly-headed blonde sang to Del Olsen. "Come on - a my grave!"

By
**DONN
MULLALLY**

CHAPTER ONE

Hush Money

LIZBETH BRYAN'S house was a show place in Beverly Hills, which made it easy to find. Anybody, even a big cluck like Delmar Olsen, could pay his dollar for a conducted tour of the movie stars' homes. That way, he was sure to have La Bryan's shack pointed out to him. All it required was a little patience.

Soon the driver-guide was chirping cheerfully. "And on our left, ladies and gentlemen, that lovely ranch-type home belongs to the famous singing star, Lizbeth Bryan . . ." He ran off a short biography of the star, concluding with the titles of her last few pictures and the gratuitous information that on some days, when he'd

driven by, you could hear Miss Bryan practicing her scales.

Del had had enough. He bolted to the front of the bus, holding his handkerchief to his mouth. He mumbled, "Let me out . . . car-sick . . ."

The driver jammed on the brakes and they lurched to a stop. He swung the door open, asked, "Want me to wait for you, sir?"

Del shook his head. "No. I'll be all right."

"Okay," the driver smiled. There's a public bus line two blocks south of here. It'll take you back, when you feel okay."

Del muttered. "Thanks," through his handkerchief, and watched the bus pull out,



disappear down the winding, palm-lined street. He put the handkerchief back in his pocket, turned and stared at Lizbeth Bryan's hacienda.

It was smaller than some—only ten or twelve rooms. It was a Monterey ranch house, with stucco walls, a green shingle roof. From the street, Del judged it was laid out on a U-shaped floor plan, had a patio in the slot of the U. There was probably half an acre of land around it, with a few citrus trees, a patch of lawn, and a line of towering eucalyptus he could see over the roof of the house.

While he was casing the joint, Del noticed that the window of one room carried heavy ornamental iron grilles. An old Spanish custom, he knew, and it looked all right with that type of architecture. But, ornamental or not, the grille-work would keep anybody from breaking in. . . .

Del walked up the driveway to the front door, punched the bell. His hands were on the clammy side, his breath short. He realized he was keyed up more than slightly. And with good reason.

Delmar Olsen was a large man. Six foot three, when he straightened up all the way. No one there was going to push him around, once he got his foot in the door. He could bull his way in, all right, and say his piece. But then what? Was he any better off for saying it?

A couple of hours ago, he'd thought yes. At least this high-salaried tramp would know what he thought of her. A couple of hours ago, this had seemed important. Now he wasn't sure.

DEL ran out of time for changing his mind. The door had opened, and a very small, dark-skinned Filipino boy in a white jacket and white duck trousers eyed him suspiciously.

Del said, "I'd like to speak to Miss Bryan." He noticed that the boy had shaved his hairline to keep it out of his eyebrows.

The Filipino shook his head at Del's

question. "Miss Bryan not in now. Sorry."

"Okay," Del nodded. "I'll wait." He lunged faster than the boy, got his shoulder against the door before it was shut; bounced the little guy out of the way and stepped into the hall.

The Filipino didn't give up easy. He caught his balance and came after Del as he was crossing the entranceway to the living room. He grabbed Del's sleeve, chattering, "You can't come in. Call police!"

Del scraped the boy off his arm, gripped his shoulder until his fingers pinched bone. "Look, lad," Olsen said quietly, "I'm not selling anything. And I didn't come here to steal the family silverware. I only want to talk to Miss Bryan. If she's out, like you say, that's all right. I'm not in any rush. I said I'd wait. You don't even have to serve me any drinks or free cigarettes. I'll make out just fine by myself. Now, relax."

He spun the boy around and gave him a push, then walked into the living room. He had the whole place to himself for all of two minutes—pickled-oak walls, Indian rugs, mission-style furniture.

He was standing in front of a huge, field-stone fireplace, using it for an ashtray, when he heard high heels click across the asphalt tile of the entranceway. He looked up, half expecting to see that Miss Bryan had changed her mind and was in. So he was only half wrong.

He recognized the girl coming toward him. But it wasn't Miss Bryan. He couldn't remember her name, but he knew she was Miss Bryan's secretary. At least, that was how she'd been accounted for on board the *Mauretai* returning from Honolulu. She and the star had shared a suite on A deck.

This girl was no molting pigeon. She dressed maybe a little better than her boss—an immaculate, wrinkle-free linen suit this afternoon, and spectator pumps. Her legs were long and graceful. She knew how to dress them, too. The rest of her would pass in any company—crisp, blonde hair she wore cut short in little curls over her ears.

Maybe it was the fact that she didn't wear glasses that made it hard for Del to believe she actually was a secretary. Her eyes were large and brown, but they weren't especially friendly.

"Aren't you off your beat?" she asked him.

"There's no barricade to keep sailors on the waterfront," he informed her soberly.

"I thought you were in the ship's brig," the secretary commented.

"I was," nodded Del, "until we got in. Then, the skipper turned me over to the Federal authorities. I had a hearing, and my union posted bail."

"What do you want?"

Del shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I explained to the boy who let me in. I came to speak to Miss Bryan."

"Why? What could she possibly have to say to you?"

Del slouched into a big, wing-back chair, grinned at the girl standing across from him. "For a start, your boss could come down to the commissioner's office with me, and tell them. My lawyer will want the same information on a deposition. Aside from that, Miss Bryan has nothing to say. Nothing."

"You're wasting your time," the secretary said primly. "Miss Bryan will do none of those things. She—"

The big, double-glass door to the enclosed patio had opened, and a well-built character in a woolly white terry-cloth robe with a hood on it slapped into the room in thong-leather sandals. His skin was dark brown, almost as dark as the Filipino's. The hair at his temples was kinky and white, not too thick on the top. He had sharp features, a sharper black mustache. He looked questioningly from the secretary to Del, back to the girl.

"Marcel told me we had a visitor," he said, out of a toothy smile. "Someone who insisted on speaking to Miss Bryan."

"Marcel got that part right," Del nodded. "The name is Delmar Olsen."

"Delmar Olsen," echoed the man. "I don't believe I—"

"There's no reason why the name should mean anything to you," Del cut in quickly. "Unless you've been reading about Miss Bryan in the papers the last few days. The lady and I have shared a lot of newspaper space."

The man's eyes leveled on Olsen. Then he gasped. "You're—you're the . . ."

DEL bobbed his head solemnly. "Yeah. I'm the guy. I'm the man Miss Bryan claims tried to attack her last week when she was coming in from the Islands on the *Mauretai*."

Dell broke out a cigarette and lit it. "Look, mister," he said. "I don't know who you are. But if it makes any difference to you, I came around to square this rap. It's a little important to me. It figures in whether or not I go on eating."

"I'm Miss Bryan's husband," the man declared. "And it makes a great deal of difference to me. I don't see how, under the circumstances, you can expect Miss Bryan—"

"I expect her to level with me. Is that too much?" snapped Del. "I didn't attack her. Didn't lay a finger on her. If you're her husband, I guess you've got a right to know all this. The whole rhubarb was a frameup. Miss Bryan asked me to come to her suite after I was through at the bar, to serve drinks for a party she was throwing for a few friends. I got permission from the chief steward, took a portable bar to the suite. Big surprise—there were no guests. Your wife was running around in a lace negligee, made a play for me. I told her I wasn't having any, and started to leave."

"Before I got to the door, she'd torn her negligee and was screaming bloody murder. Next the old man had me tossed in the brig. A nice, filthy business, Mr. Bryan. But there it is."

The husband of the star winced. "My

name isn't Bryan. I'm Kent Kenwood."

"Sorry, Mr. Kenwood." Del grinned sourly. "I guess I don't know my way around the Hollywood jungle."

"It doesn't matter," asserted Kenwood. "I'm not sensitive—on that subject. But what you tell me—if it's true—"

Del held up a hand and stopped him. "Look. I realize I'm asking you to take my word against your wife's," he said. "And I don't have a hell of a lot of proof. There is one small item in my favor. This young lady," Del nodded at Miss Bryan's secretary, "was sharing the suite with your wife. She wasn't on hand for that party—and, as long as we have her right here, I'd like to ask her where she was and how come."

Kenwood nodded at the secretary. "If you can tell us, Mary," he said, "it might prove very helpful."

The girl studied her well-manicured hands for a moment, then raised her eyes. "Miss Bryan told me she wished to have the suite to herself for a few hours. I was at the bar, with a man I'd met on the trip."

Kenwood nodded again, his face grey, bleak. "I see. I think that will be all, Mary. I'll—I'll call you if there's anything else."

When they were alone, Kenwood rose, crossed the room to a small, carved chest. He opened it, took out a bottle of whiskey. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"I never turn one down when I'm not working," Del replied. He let Kenwood bring the drink to him.

KENWOOD paced nervously before the fireplace, his sandals scuffing on the bare stones, the robe flopping around his brown shins. He cleared his throat a couple of times, tried a rather bleak smile. "I'm a bit at a loss, Mr. Olsen," he said at last, "to know how to put this. It almost inevitably sounds as though I were pleading for your sympathy—and, in a way I suppose I must. Not for myself," he added hurriedly.

"What do you mean, my sympathy?" Del asked. "I thought I was the guy in trouble."

Kenwood dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "You're in no trouble at all, Mr. Olson. I assure you that we shall not press my wife's charges. The whole matter will be dropped, hushed up. So far as we're concerned, it's a closed incident."

"What am I supposed to do, Mr. Kenwood?" Del wanted to know. "The incident isn't closed with me, until I get an acquittal. I have to work for a living. Nobody'd have me on a ship, with a thing like that on my record."

"Precisely what I meant when I said we must appeal to your sympathy," Kenwood stated, staring cross-eyed into the bottom of his highball glass. "I realize I've no right to ask it of you, but you must understand about Lizbeth—Miss Bryan. She's a highly emotional woman. She's been subjected to strains of a very intense nature. Just before Lizbeth left on this Honolulu trip," Kenwood went on, "she was on the ragged edge of a nervous breakdown. As a matter of fact, the sea voyage was her doctor's suggestion."

"Do you expect me to consider myself part of the treatment?" asked Del.

"No." Kenwood shook his head gravely. "I merely wish to convey Lizbeth's state of mind. She'd been working very hard. I'm confident this whole affair is the result of hysteria, and Lizbeth will be the first to regret it when she's had an opportunity."

"Okay," Del said. "So she regrets it. Where does that leave me? I'm still a guy who goes around attacking innocent unprotected dames."

"I appreciate how you feel, Mr. Olsen, believe me," Kenwood stated, looking grieved. "And you can depend on our doing the right thing."

"What do you call the right thing?"

"Suppose," Kenwood suggested, "suppose we were to give you, say, ten thousand dollars? Would you consider that a

fair compensation for your embarrassment?"

Del shrugged heavily. "I don't think I was embarrassed that much, Mr. Kenwood."

"Well, you were certainly inconvenienced," Kenwood assured him. "For my part, I'm satisfied ten thousand is a fair price—if you'll accept it."

"I don't know," Del declared, getting to his feet. "I could do a lot of things with ten G's, of course. But . . ."

Kenwood placed a fatherly hand on Del's shoulder. "You don't have to make your mind up right now, old man," he said. "I'm not making this offer on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Think it over. Call me tomorrow—any time. And don't worry about those charges of Lizbeth's. We'll take care of them." He walked to the door with Del, patted his shoulder affectionately. "Everything is going to be all right, Mr. Olsen," he said.

Del shook his head. "I wish I was as sure as you are, pal," he declared.

CHAPTER TWO

Pistol Pitch

DEL OLSEN had hiked two blocks down the winding tree-lined Beverly Hills street to his bus stop, before he realized it. He was in a kind of daze—a ten-thousand-dollar daze. It wasn't every day in his life someone offered him that much money. He didn't quite savvy this Kenwood. The offer had come a little too fast. As though the whole matter had been thrashed out before. Del got there, and the price tag set.

All right. Suppose Lizbeth Bryan was a neurotic dame, as her husband said. People in their position didn't have to buy themselves out of a foul-up. They could refuse to press charges, which Kenwood said they were doing anyway. And, Del realized, if he went ahead and insisted on being tried,

he'd only look more stupid than he did already—unless there was something else. Something that would have to come out in court, and was worth ten thousand dollars to Kenwood to suppress.

Del was standing at his bus stop, waiting for transportation, when this fire-engine-red convertible swerved to the curb in front of him. Miss Bryan's secretary was driving. She smiled at Del.

"Can I give you a lift, Mr. Olsen?" she asked pleasantly.

Del slid in beside her, grinning. "What've I got to lose?"

He should've insisted on an answer, but he let her get away with laughing as she put the car in gear, "I wouldn't know."

Del relaxed, watched the girl jockey her convertible through the traffic on Sunset Boulevard. She drove with a lot of confidence, kept them out of the bridle path that ran down the center of the street past the Beverly Hills Hotel. The top was back. The wind whipped the small, tight curls on her head without dislocating any of them. She was a very cool gal, Del decided.

He said, "Look—maybe I shouldn't ask, but where are we going?"

"Wherever you say," she smiled, without taking her eyes off a truck crowding her right fender.

"Then you're just out for the ride," he remarked, eyeing her.

"That's right."

"In other words, you picked me up so you'd have a chance to pitch me on Kenwood's proposition?"

Mary shook her head. She swung the car into a side street, parked under a pepper tree that dripped over the curb. She set the hand brake and turned off the ignition. So she hadn't stopped just to boot his tail out of the car.

"I have no idea how much Kent offered you," she said. "But don't take it."

"Ten thousand bucks is a lot of loot," Del commented.

"It's chicken feed," the girl declared. "We can split a hundred thousand, if you'll let me handle it for you."

"Wait a minute," Del said. "I thought you were on Bryan's payroll. Who are you working for?"

"Mary Todd." She smiled. Her hand crept across the seat, covering his. It was a cold hand. She added, "And Del Olsen. That's why I wanted to talk to you, before you sold your opportunity short."

"I guess I'm what they call a captive audience," Dell said. "Go ahead."

"I imagine it seemed strange that Kenwood would offer to pay ten thousand dollars for you to forget what Lizbeth did," Mary Todd began, arching her eyebrows significantly.

"It seemed as weird as hell," Del told her. "Of course I'll admit I don't know too much about what goes on in this town. Or its people. But ten G's is important money, just to be used as a conversational football."

"Good," nodded Mary. "I'm glad you questioned Kenwood's motives. I'd hate to have to explain this to a man who'd accept his offer on its face."

"Okay," growled Del. "It's phony. So what?"

"The offer itself isn't phony," the girl stated hurriedly. "Kent would pay ten thousand dollars, all right. He'd be happy to. You see, Mr. Olsen, Lizbeth Bryan has cracked wide open since she got home. I was with her when it happened. We'd just come in from the boat. She seemed to be all right—and then," the girl snapped her fingers, "she suddenly didn't know where she was, didn't recognize Kent or me, thought we wanted to kill her. She was raving and screaming. It was pretty horrible."

"Where is she now?" Del asked.

"Locked in her room at the house."

"The one with the grilled windows."

The girl nodded solemnly. "You can see why Kent accepted your story of what happened in the stateroom so readily—why he

wouldn't want this case aired in court."

"Okay," Del bobbed his head. "What's this about us splitting a hundred G's?"

MARY patted the back of his hand. "You've heard of the man who fell in the garbage pail and came up smelling like roses?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the next time you shave, say hello to him for me. You fell into the sweetest-smelling garbage in America. That is, if you like the smell of money as much as I do."

"I don't get it," muttered Del. "I can stretch my imagination and see where it might be worth ten thousand to a man like Kenwood to keep his wife's condition a secret. But a hundred grand?" Del shook his head.

"You don't understand what's involved," Mary said patiently. "Let me tell you. Just before we went to Honolulu, Lizbeth finished a picture. Frankly, I think that's what brought this on. It started out as one of those tax-beating ventures. She and Kent formed a corporation to produce the picture independently, with their own money—the star's salary to come in the form of capital gain. Kent did the first screenplay, and was the producer. Everything would have been wonderful, except that after shooting for a couple of months they pre-viewed—and discovered they had the dog of the ages on their hands. They shot retakes for another month—still nothing. And money getting very short.

"Lizbeth finally went to her old producer, a man named Sterling. He offered to bail them out with brains. He'd make a passable picture out of the mess of footage Kent had shot. But it would cost another couple hundred thousand.

"Kent raised this money by selling sixty percent of the company to a big bookie named Hank Nathan. For a finish, I think Nathan had closer to half a million in the picture before it was in the can. This time, though, it was good. I saw the final preview,

and I don't know how Sterling did it—but it is one of the best things Lizbeth ever made. It opens in the East this week. Everybody stands to make a lot of money—unless, of course, the word gets out that the star is a strait-jacket case.”

“What difference would it make?” Del asked. “You say it’s a good picture.”

“You don’t know this business, Del,” Mary told him. “It’s very sensitive to these things. It has to be. Audiences will stay away from a picture by the thousands, if it features a performer who’s died since the picture was shot. Insanity would have the same morbid effect on the box office. No releasing organization would touch Lizbeth’s picture, if the public knew her condition.”

“And you think I can hold them up for a hundred G’s?”

Mary nodded silently, her eyes cold and blue, level on his.

“I’d have to be a Class A heel to go after your proposition, though, wouldn’t I?” snarled Del. “After all, the poor dame’s got all her money sunk in the picture. She’s flipped her lid, she’s helpless.”

Mary’s upper lip curled. “Look at it this way,” she said. “You’re a Class A chump if you don’t. You didn’t ask for that incident on the boat. You’re not responsible for any of the rest of it. And besides, you won’t be taking money away from Miss Bryan. If I know Kent Kenwood and Vinson Sterling, they’ll put their pointed little heads together and figure a way to add the hundred thousand to the negative cost of the film. I won’t go into how pictures are financed, but they’ll collect fifty per cent of this immediately from the releasing organization, and the balance will be taken off their taxes.”

“In other words,” Del said, “it’s found money?”

“You can call it found,” Mary agreed, smiling. “Now, what are you going to do—hand it to the first cop you see, like an honest shnook? Or would you rather set your-

self up for life with fifty thousand bucks?”

Del looked at the girl beside him as she finished speaking. She had a lovely, unspoiled face. There wasn’t a shrewd, cruel line in it. It was cold, maybe—but not cruel. A very desirable gal—particularly for a guy interested in larceny. She was waiting for an answer.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” he grinned. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

DEL did that—bought Mary Todd a drink. A cherry coke, at a drive-in on Sunset Boulevard. She was crunching on the shaved ice at the bottom of the glass when he told her how he felt about her proposition.

“It’s like this, honey,” he explained. “I guess I’m no more allergic to the big, easy buck than the next guy. But all these huge sums of money are too rich for me. I’d probably kill myself, if I had fifty grand. I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

Mary put the empty glass down on the window tray beside her, shook her head. “I’m not disappointed, Del. I think you’re a shnook. But you’re a cute shnook. You won’t try to double-cross me now and go for the whole hundred grand for yourself?”

Del chuckled, held up his hand as though he were taking a Boy Scout oath. Their waitress came around, collected the trays from the sides of the car.

Mary lit a cigarette, waited until the girl had trotted her tight shorts past the front of the car, before she said, “You’d better not, Del. There are some very rugged people in this situation. They would take handling.”

“I don’t want any part of them or their money,” Del declared. He hit the door handle with the heel of his hand so it sprung open. “Do you want I should get out and walk? I mean, as long as it’s no deal, I don’t suppose you’re particularly interested in hauling me any farther.”

"Sit still, darling," Mary said, punching the starter. "I don't have anything better to do. I'll drive you where you're going."

"Thanks," Del slammed the door and settled back in the seat. "As long as you understand kindness won't make me change my mind."

She eyed him archly for a moment before slipping the car in reverse. "I wasn't thinking of trying kindness," she smiled.

"You wouldn't threaten me, would you, baby?"

"I might."

* * *

For the first time in his life, Delmar Olsen was wooed by a beautiful woman. There had been dames who'd made mild passes at him from time to time, particularly old-maid school teachers on a cruise to the Islands—even some fairly tender gear who'd occasionally got the idea he was on the *Maureta's* wine list because he worked behind the bar.

But this was different. This was a campaign. Mary took him in and out of a half a dozen bars on the way downtown. They danced to juke-box music in a couple of them, and made with the loose-hung hips in a Mexican joint. It broke up in front of his hotel. He didn't ask her to come to his room.

He hopped out of the car as soon as she'd drawn to the curb, slammed the door, spoke across it. "Thanks a lot, Mary. It's been fun. See you around some time." He turned and bolted to the lobby of the hotel before she could phrase her own invitation—before he weakened.

Del locked himself in the room. He peeled off his shirt, stacked pillows at the head of the bed, stretched out. He had smoked a cigarette down to where it was starting to burn his fingers when the phone rang.

He groaned, got up and crossed the

room to answer it. He recognized her voice.

Mary Todd said, "Coward!" and hung up.

Which was all right with him. Del didn't have any very fast answer for her. He was a coward, about a lot of things. About taking money he had no right to, for one.

He'd had time while crawling pubs with Mary to do enough thinking to straighten himself out. She wasn't his girl, and her proposition wasn't for him either. Kenwood could squander his ten grand some other way, too. As long as there wasn't any criminal action against him, Del decided, let the whole matter drop. The union would get him another ship as soon as the court cleared him. And he'd go back to sea, put up with the ribbing he could expect until the news got out about Lizbeth Bryan. When it did, everybody would know why the charges against him hadn't been pressed.

Del didn't feel especially noble about this decision. It seemed right. After all, how low could he get—taking advantage of an insane dame?

Del went downstairs to the little dining room off the lobby, had a steak and french fries, called it dinner. He bought an evening paper at the desk and returned to his room. He thought he'd hit the sack early.

He almost made it. He'd dropped the newspaper on the foot of his bed when someone hammered on his door. He wasn't expecting company. He didn't know the three characters who crowded in.

NONE of them was big enough to push Del out of their way, but the lead guy was carrying a gun.

"I'd ask you to sit down," Del commented acidly, with a nod in the direction of the gun, "but I see you're in a hurry. What can I do for you?"

The last man in the room shut the door behind him. In elevator shoes, he came

to Del's shoulder—a small, dark-skinned guy with slanty eyes and a hooked horn. His lips were thin, had a sick, grey cast to them.

He said, "You're Del Olsen?"

"So?" Del asked. His hands felt wet, his sides sticky with sweat. Cold sweat.

The boss man waved his hood's gun out of sight. "Put your hands down, Olsen. But keep them where I can see them. I've got a deal to talk with you. How would you like to make ten thousand dollars a year—tax free?"

Del shook his head. "What is this, bank night? Everybody offers me money. I suppose you're a friend of Kenwood's?"

"That's right."

"Is this his latest idea? He offered me ten grand flat, this afternoon."

"Yeah," his guest commented with a bob of his small head. "He told me. I didn't buy the idea. We can't just drop those charges, Olsen. The newspapers would smell something phony and swarm all over us. I've got four hundred thousand dollars in this already. I'm willing to protect it."

"I want you to cop a plea, and I'll bank ten grand anywhere you say, in your name, for every year you serve."

Del leaned against the wall of his room, studying the little hood and his two boys. The gun was only technically out of sight, bulged in the sport-coat pocket of the man who'd followed it into the room—still pointed at Del.

"Suppose I don't go for being a shut-in?" he asked, trying to sound as though he had a choice. "Besides, how do I know I'd get the money? Once I'm in the clink, it might be a little tough for me to send a collector around."

"Hank Nathan never welched on a deal yet," the man snapped.

"You're Nathan?"

"Right."

"How long do I have to make up my mind?" asked Del, eyeing the man.

"All the time you need," Nathan replied, with a nervous gesture of his hand. "Five minutes."

"You mean I have to decide, in five minutes, whether or not I want to go to jail?" Del demanded. He snorted. "Are you sure you can spare the time?"

Nathan shook his head. "But I don't want to rush you."

"Suppose I turn your deal down?" Del asked.

The bookie grinned narrowly. "That's why I brought my sales force along," he chuckled, taking in his two men with a sweep of his hand.

"Then you'd better tell them to start their pitch," Del declared. "Because it's no sale."

Nathan glanced at his wristwatch. "You still got a couple of minutes to change your mind," he said.

"I don't need them. I wouldn't confess to this rap if you were giving me your end of Lizbeth Bryan's new picture. So let's get this over with."

They did.

CHAPTER THREE

Bloody Mary

HANK NATHAN and his sales department were gone when Del came to. They'd left him with a lot of memories—lumps. The kind that grow out of a gun-whipping. He was lying face down on the thin rug beside his bed. He could feel the sharp bristles of the mat against his chin. The rug smelled bad, as though it was full of stale cigarette and cigar ashes. Funny he'd notice how it smelled . . .

Del put his hand out to push himself off the floor. It touched a part of the rug that was wet, sticky. His blood. The light was on in his room; he could see what it was, by lifting his head.

He groaned, rolled over and managed to pull himself up on the side of the bed. He

flopped there, half on his knees and half on the bed, fighting for strength to make it the rest of the way to his feet. Being so far from the floor made him dizzy, sick. He clawed at the covers of the bed to hold himself there, keep from sliding back.

The last thing Del remembered about Hank Nathan was the bookie sneering, "How big a sucker can you be, Olsen?" The boys had been holding Del on his feet. The Olsen skull was probably as thick as any, but it was never built to take the sapping he'd absorbed.

"This is only a sample, Olsen," Hank Nathan had continued. "If you play ball, my deal still goes. If you don't, what'll happen to you will make tonight seem like a fast game of canasta." With that, he'd made the top of Del's head again with his sap, and the lights in the room had whipped themselves into a big, hot sunburst.

Now he was alone, hanging onto the edge of the bed. Like a punch-drunk fighter on the ropes. No one was going to come and help him after he took the count. He had to make it on his own.

He swayed to his feet, lurched across the room to the bath, stuck his head under the cold-water faucet. He turned it on full force, the jet splashing against the back of his neck. He rotated his head under the stream of water.

When he'd had enough, he dried himself, stripped off his wet, blood-spattered shirt, dropped it in a sodden heap on the tile floor of the bath.

Del looked at himself in the mirror. Ordinarily, he had a full, round, Svenska face. Now, it was a little lopsided. His eyes were always small—but tonight they were puffed, discolored bags of flesh. His mouth was fat, the lower lip split.

Del soaked a towel in cold water, folded it into a foot square, buried his face in it. Standing there with his face in the wet towel, he got a clear picture of himself—as though he were in the other room, looking at Olsen through the open bathroom door.

He didn't like what he saw. He was through being pushed around by a lot of cheap hoods and dames with large ideas.

He threw the wet towel in the lavatory angrily, went into the other room and picked up the phone. Mary Todd had given him a number where she said she could be reached if he changed his mind. He let the switchboard operator get it for him, waited while the phone rang, heard Mary answer, "Yes?"

He said, "Mary, this is Olsen. I want to see you right away. It's important."

"Of course, darling. Do you want me to drive down and get you?" Her voice sounded cool, impersonal.

"No. I'll take a cab. Just let me have the address."

"The Ardmore Apartments," she replied sweetly. "On Harvard, just off Wilshire Boulevard."

"Okay. I'll be seeing you." He hung up, pulled his suitcase out from under the bed and found himself a clean shirt. It had been too easy, finding an excuse to see Mary Todd. Why was he going out there—to thank her for the beating Nathan had handed him? Or was he really chump enough to believe her story that she could "handle" Nathan and the others? If she could only manage to separate Nathan from his army and give Del ten minutes alone with him, it would be worth the taxi fare.

THE building where Miss Todd lived went back to the early twenties—the Beau Geste period of architecture. It looked more like one of those French foreign-legion desert forts than anything else. Of course, there were windows piercing the mud-colored walls. The lobby was only dimly lighted by a couple of weak yellow globes—just enough for Del to make out the Moorish-type tilework as he rushed through it after paying off his hack.

He rode a small, push-button elevator to the fourth floor, padded down the hall to

Miss Todd's apartment. She came to the door in a red-velvet housecoat that covered just about everything, hid nothing.

She gasped when the light from inside her room fell across his face. "My God, Del! What's happened to you?"

He walked past her into the living room of her apartment before he answered. "I had a small difference of opinion with three guys," he explained. "At least one of them is an old friend of yours—Hank Nathan."

Mary clutched her throat, her face coloring high on her cheekbones. "Wh-what did he want?" she stammered.

Del shrugged, fell heavily in a large, green overstuffed chair, studied the girl through the puffed slits he was using for eyes. "Like everybody else, he was very eager to give me a lot of money. There was one slight difference in his deal, though. I had to earn it. I had to plead guilty to that silly charge of your boss's. Nathan said he'd pay me ten G's for every year I served. I didn't go—so he had a couple of his gorillas try persuasion. It didn't get them anywhere, but my looks weren't improved, either."

Mary came across the room to him, her face wrinkled with concern. "Can I get you anything?" she asked. "An ice pack . . . a drink?"

Del took her hand. It was cold. As cold as a rubber glove full of ice water. He held it to the swollen side of his face, looking up at her as he did. "This will do for now. First, there are a couple of things I'm curious about. I'd like to know who you gave my address to."

She shook her head. "I—I didn't."

Del crushed her hand, saw her wince. "Don't lie, baby," he said. "I'm a very unimportant jerk, and I was living in a flea-bag hotel. There are a thousand of them in Los Angeles. Those guys didn't just pick the right one out of the air. Somebody told them where I was staying."

She said, "You're hurting me."

"No foolin'?" he leered. "I didn't take

you for the fragile type." He pulled her down to her knees, their faces on a line. "Who did you talk to, baby?" he insisted.

Her forehead was beading with perspiration. "I—I may have mentioned it to Kenwood," she confessed. "When I returned from driving you downtown, he asked where I'd been. I don't recall my exact words. I may have told him."

Del released her hand, and she fell back, squatting on her heels like an Indian squaw at the family baking. Mary was kneading her hand, pouting up at him. "Why didn't you try lighted matches under my fingernails?"

"Don't give me any ideas," Del growled. "Or any double-talk, either. This party has become fairly personal to me. When I ask a question, I want a straight answer. If I have to be a heel to get it, okay."

Mary stood up, straightening her housecoat. "I'm still pouring, if you'd like that drink I offered you."

She added, smiling, "I won't lace it with arsenic."

"All right," Del nodded. "Make it bourbon and plain water. Then we'll talk about how you can square yourself for dropping my address to Kenwood."

She made an extravagant curtsy, turned and swished the full skirt of her housecoat through the swinging door to the kitchen. The door had only fanned twice, when Del heard her scream.

FOR a moment, the sound froze him to the chair. Then he bolted out of it, running. He hit the swinging door with the heel of his hand, batted it out of the way, was halfway across the kitchen before he could pull himself up. Which was too bad. He didn't see what hit him, or who delivered it. Not until later, much later, did he see Mary.

She was lying on the floor of the kitchen, only a foot or two away from him. There were several large fragments of brown glass on the floor between them. That

wasn't all. A lake of blood fingered toward him from Mary's body.

He raised his head painfully, slowly. Her housecoat had been ripped open from the chin to the hem. She hadn't been wearing anything under it. Her body was a mass of knife wounds. Hamburger.

Del got to his knees, crept closer to her. He found a corner of her robe, tried to cover her with it—wasn't too successful. He gave up. How decent could a corpse be?

He lurched to his feet, looked around the tiny, gore-spattered kitchen. His own clothes weren't exactly pure. The knife had been imbedded in Mary's throat.

Del was dazed, confused. Broken glass crunched underfoot when he moved—the bottle someone had used to drop him when he charged in there.

He heard a door close in the other room of the apartment, the living room. Kent Kenwood's voice sounded: "Mary! It's me, Kent. Where are you?"

Del stumbled across the littered kitchen, cuffed the swinging door out of the way. Kenwood was standing in the center of the room, his jaw slack, eyes staring when he saw Del. He said, "Where's Mary?"

Del made a motion with his thumb in the direction of the kitchen. "She's in there. But unless you've got a strong stomach, stay out."

Kenwood didn't. He came as far as the open door of the kitchen, looked inside. He took what he saw like a low blow. "Y—you . . ." he stammered, his face white.

"No. I didn't do it," Del growled. "I came here to talk to Mary. She went out to the kitchen to make me a drink. I heard her scream, barged in there and got conked with a bottle before I knew what the score was. I just now came to, saw her."

Kenwood backed away from Del, his face white, frightened. Del said, "Where are you going?"

"I—I think we ought to call the police." Kenwood nervously mopped his face.

"Pick up that phone and I'll brain you with it!" Del snapped. "I'm in a jam, and I know it. I was framed, and the frame's almost good enough to work—unless I can figure something out."

"Wh—what do you mean?"

"Look," Del said, following Kenwood up. He grabbed the writer by his shoulder and propelled him into a corner of the day-enport. "I'm already on the blotter, charged with attacking your wife. We both know that's a bum rap—but the cops don't. Now they find me here with a dead woman and a bum alibi about being hit on the head. I wouldn't stand a prayer. It's a beautiful out for everybody—except Del Olsen. And that poor kid in the other room. For them, it stinks. And I'm not lying down for it."

Del saw Kenwood was chewing on his undernourished mustache. "You're acquainted with a guy named Hank Nathan?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Hank and two of his hoodlums came by my hotel tonight with a proposition. Hank seemed a little sore that he couldn't make me agree to sing a guilty plea for loot. He gave me a few lumps to remember him by. But now, I don't believe he stopped there. I think he left one of his boys behind to tail me, if I left the hotel. When I came up here to see Mary Todd, I was playing into Nathan's hands. If Mary was killed, and I was the only one around to be the patsy for her death, it wouldn't make any difference to Nathan how I pleaded on that other charge. No jury would ever be convinced I hadn't attacked both women. Jolly for Nathan—tough for Del Olsen. I'm glad you turned up here, though, Kenwood," Olsen went on thoughtfully. "It gives me at least a fighting chance to drop this mess back right in friend Nathan's lap."

"Of course, I'll do anything I can to help," Kenwood chattered glibly. "But I don't—"

"Okay," Del nodded. "Then let's put this show on the road. Suppose you call Nathan, tell him you have to see him. It's urgent. You want him to meet you at the corner of Olympic and Crenshaw. You'll be in your car. He knows it, doesn't he?"

"Yes, naturally."

"Good. Get with it."

Kenwood rose, started across the room to the telephone. Then he stopped, looked questioningly at Del. "I—I'm not sure we're doing the right thing," he said.

Del grinned crookedly. "There isn't just a hell of a lot you can do about it, though, is there, Mr. Kenwood?"

THE intersection had too much illumination to suit him, so Del had Kenwood park nearly in the middle of the block on Olympic. As Kenwood set the hand brake, he said, "What do we do now?"

Del replied, "It's up to you, pal. You can take off your belt, let me tie your wrists with it, gag you with your pocket handkerchief—or I'll knock you out now, tie you up and toss you in the back end, where you won't be in the way."

Kenwood stiffened. "Knock me out?" he gasped.

"Yeah," nodded Del, doubling a large fist. "Which'll it be?"

He saw Kenwood begin to fumble with his belt buckle. It took only a couple of minutes to bind the writer, gag him, have him climb over the back of the seat and lie down on the floor in the rear end. Del assured Kenwood he was being smart. Then he borrowed Kenwood's pork-pie hat, his overcoat; put them on, forcing the seams a little; slouched under the wheel to wait for Nathan. It wasn't long.

A big convertible roared by, made a U-turn at the intersection, came back and parked behind Kenwood's car. The lights went off, and in a minute Nathan opened the car door, slid in beside Del. "What is it, Kent?" he said "What's all this urgency business?"

Del didn't answer him. He grabbed the front of Nathan's suit, straightened him out with a solid left cross that traveled almost the width of the car before it connected. The bookie went limp. Del took the gun out of Nathan's shoulder clip and slapped him conscious. "How many boys are back there in your car, Nathan?" he said.

The bookie didn't talk so rugged on his own, looking down the bore of his personal heater. "No—no one . . ." he declared in a breaking falsetto.

Del switched the lights of Kenwood's heap on and off, got an answering signal from the other car. He nodded at Nathan. "You'd better have the wiring checked in that crate, chum. But some other time. Right now, we have places to go. You better be good, too, while we travel."

He got Kenwood's sedan away from the curb. The other car followed as he turned north on Crenshaw and again west at Wilshire Boulevard. He made it a sedate trip, with no effort to lose the other car or excite Nathan's boys. He didn't figure he'd be able to get away in Kenwood's car, and two-to-one odds were a little against the home team. He sloughed the car around in front of Kenwood's house, spraying gravel in the driveway, turned off the lights. Nathan's boys had stopped across the street, also dousing their lights.

Del said, "Here we are, Nathan. We're going inside where we can have some privacy. Your mob won't worry about you as long as they believe you're with Kenwood, which'll give us time to straighten you out."

He prodded the bookie with the muzzle of the gun, said, "Let's go." He nudged Nathan to the front door, unlocked it with a key on the ring that had been in the car ignition, nudged Nathan again. This time, through the door. He found a light switch and snapped it on, waved Nathan toward the living room. "We can probably find a study or something in the rear of the house," he said. "If I have to beat you up,

I don't want your boys to hear you screaming."

Del started to march Nathan through the living room of Kenwood's house, turned on a floor lamp as they passed it. They got as far as the davenport which stood squarely before the fireplace. A head was raised over the back of it—Lisbeth Bryan's head. Her flaming-red hair, photogenic features—large eyes fixed on the two men.

"Oh!" she yawned sleepily. "I thought it was Kent." She didn't seem especially surprised that it wasn't.

Nathan said, "Hello, Lizbeth."

She looked at him vaguely, mouthed a placid, "Hello," as though he were someone she'd met once in her life at a press party. She wasn't embarrassed, obviously; didn't feel anything about seeing two men in her living room, one of them carrying a gun. This could happen every day. If she placed Del Olsen at all, she gave no indication.

Del was completely satisfied about one thing. Mary Todd might have been a female who worked the angles, but she'd been leveling when she said Miss Bryan was off her rudder.

Lizbeth stood up, gaped daintily against the back of her hand. She was wearing an ankle-length, blond-mink coat. She said, "If you gentlemen will pardon me, I believe I'll go to bed," started to walk around the end of the davenport. One corner of her long coat caught on the arm as she passed it, drew back, exposing what had been white sharkskin slacks. They were stained red. Blood red.

Del almost lost interest in what had been his main chance when he entered that room. He forgot Hank Nathan. It was all right, because Nathan had seen the same thing. Like Del, he was stuck to the rug.

Del watched her drift out of the room, as spooky as a tulle fog. He jerked himself out of his trance before Nathan could break, waved his gun at the bookie, said, "Sit down."

There was a telephone on a small table beside the davenport, its long extension cord coiling across the deep-pile carpet. He picked it up, listened, got a dial tone. He kept one eye on Nathan as he signaled the operator, asked for the Beverly Hills Police, said, "Hello—I want to report a murder. . . ."

INSPECTOR MACKEY was a neat-looking little man with a red, earnest face, small features. He had taken Del to the Beverly Hills station, listened very intently as Del dictated all he knew about the death of Mary Todd to a police stenographer.

"When I saw the blood on Miss Bryan's slacks," Del added, almost apologetically, "I knew, if I'd asked Kenwood what he was doing in Miss Todd's apartment, I would've saved myself a lot of trouble. But I was so sold on Nathan or one of his hoods for the killer, it never occurred to me to question Kenwood."

The inspector shook his head, his round face solemn. "I doubt if he'd have told you the truth. After all, he was trying to cover up for his wife. He'd gone to the apartment, as he tells us now, because he had a very strong hunch his wife was there—why she was there. Ever since she came back from Honolulu, she'd had this insane fixation that Miss Todd had stolen Kenwood's affection. She had even threatened to kill Miss Todd. So, when Miss Bryan managed to break out of that locked room where they were keeping her, she simply made good her threat. Kenwood knew that, the minute he saw Miss Todd's body."

Del got to his feet, looked around Mackey's small, bare office. He shrugged a sharp muscular cramp out of his shoulders. "It's been a long day for me, Inspector. If nobody has any objections, I think I'll get quietly stinking."

No one tripped him on the way out. ♦ ♦ ♦

"We're going to stay in this room until you talk," I said.



Never Cry Cop!

By
DON JAMES

This was the test that all his years on the force could not prepare him for: Could he forget Mary, to do a cop's job?

THE scenery doesn't matter much where Butte is concerned. But even after ten years, you remember the people. Butte history is fabulous in rugged individuals, frontier ethics, and rough and tumble living.

I thought about that as I went in search of a taxi. The station looked much smaller

than I remembered. It looked older, too.

I didn't need a taxi. Clay Sullivan waited for me at the curb in a police car. We'd gone to high school together and his strong, broad youthfulness had become the solid heaviness and hardness you see in some cops. He got out of the car when he saw me and held out his hand.

"How are you, Al?" he said.

We shook hands and sized up one another, making friendly jokes of the years and the pounds we'd gained and he motioned me into the car, circled, and headed up Arizona street.

"How's Portland?" he asked.

"Beautiful. A good place to live, Clay."

He nodded. "Sometimes I tell the missus I wish I'd gone out there when you did. You've done all right on the force there, too. Lieutenant's good in a city that size."

"You've done all right here, Clay."

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

We rode in silence for a few blocks and I looked at the changes in the town.

Clay said, "Good-looking prisoner we're holding for you."

"That's what I've heard."

"You've got the case buttoned up?"

"If we can get what we want from her. She knows where Berg and Sandoz are hiding in. We're sure of that."

"We can't make her talk, Al."

"You've done enough. You spotted the hot money she was passing. You picked her up for us. The rest of it is ours."

"That stick-up was quite a job, huh?"

"Sixty grand," I said. "We think she drove the get-away car. Dope is that she's Berg's girl."

Clay shook his head thoughtfully. "She doesn't look like it, Al. Don't get me wrong—I've been in the business long enough to know you can't tell by looks. But there's something about her—hell, I don't know."

"I know what you mean."

"She's a Butte girl," he said wonderingly. "Did you know that?"

"That's what your report said."

"Not old-time Butte. Not like the rest of us. Her folks were Okies. Moved in during the depression. She's only twenty-four."

"Young."

"We're just holding her for questioning," he said.

"That's right. That and the dough she passed. Maybe it doesn't mean a thing unless we can pin her down."

He dropped me at the hotel. I told him that I'd meet him at the station after I'd cleaned up.

CLAY had her brought up to a small office where we wouldn't be disturbed. The old building was heavy with the smell of disinfectant and too many years of sordid traffic.

She stood before us and looked at me. She was small and dark and trim. She was pretty. She was clean. Clay was right. She didn't look like a girl who'd get mixed up with a man like Berg.

I took a deep breath and said, "So you're Mary Anders."

"Yes."

A low, polite voice—not frightened, or subservient, or timid.

I said, "You'd better sit down. This will take some time."

"Thank you."

She sat down and looked at me again.

Very carefully I said, "I'm Lieutenant Kingsley from Portland. You know why I'm here, don't you?"

"Yes."

"We can save a lot of time and trouble if you'll tell us where we can find Anton Berg and George Sandoz."

"I don't know."

"Where did you get the money?"

"I don't know."

The telephone rang and Clay answered it. He listened, grunted a couple of affirmatives, and hung up.

"You can get along without me, can't you?" he asked, and when I nodded, he

went out, the door slamming behind him.

Suddenly the room was very quiet except for our breathing. There was a key in the lock. I got up from behind the desk and went over and locked the door. She watched me, and our eyes held all the time I was doing it.

When the door was locked she stood and faced me.

"The greatest double-cross in history," I said. "At least in history that interests me most. My history."

She didn't say anything.

I said, "There's only one thing about it that's good. No one knows. It didn't last long enough."

She still didn't say anything.

I said, "And you're going to keep still about that part of it."

Abruptly tears rolled down her cheeks and her lips trembled.

"Oh, Al . . ." she whispered softly. It was almost a moan. Then she half stumbled toward me and I caught her.

I didn't intend to kiss her again. It was the one thing that was never going to happen. I could have killed her, maybe—but never kiss her again.

Her lips had the wet, salty taste of tears, and even in that stench of disinfectant, her hair smelled clean and soapy as it always had.

AFTER a while she stopped sobbing and I cleaned up her face with a handkerchief and wiped the lipstick off my own mouth. She sat again in the chair across the desk from me and I lit cigarettes for us.

"I don't know what to say," she finally said.

"Let's look at it my way a moment."

"I know how that is, Al. I'm so sorry I could die."

"Maybe you don't know how it is. If Anton Berg is your idea of a man, you don't know at all."

"Don't, Al."

I wanted her to listen to my side. I was

the guy who was never serious about a girl. Just a guy who had a small apartment and a bank account and a job he liked. A happy guy, I guess, in my own small way. Then I met Mary, who had an apartment down the street. We had dinner and a show together a few times. It built and suddenly I was kissing her and talking about wedding rings.

She worked in a small branch bank and that branch was held up. She wasn't in the bank the morning it happened. Witnesses said a girl had driven the getaway car. They put the finger on Berg and Sandoz from out picture files. "We checked," I finished. "Berg was in San Francisco a year or so ago. He had a girl. Her name was Mary Anders."

She shook her head blindly, the tears coming again.

"I don't like to be the fall guy," I said.

"Al . . . please . . ."

"Don't let that kiss fool you, Mary. Every guy is allowed one weak moment once in a while. It's over. Now—*where's Berg?*"

She closed her eyes. She didn't answer.

"Where?" I said again. My voice was harsh.

"I don't know."

"Mary," I said quietly, "we're going to stay in this room until you talk. Tonight—tomorrow—whenever it is. This is more than a police case. This is something I've got to know and clean up, because I'm a cop who fell for the wrong girl."

* * *

I had coffee brought in at two o'clock in the morning. We finished it and I let her have another cigarette.

The tears were long since gone. Fatigue was in her eyes, in the lines of her mouth, the nervous hands. I felt the same fatigue.

It went like this: Where were you when the bank was held up? What time did you

leave your apartment? Was Berg with you? Did you meet him? Where did you drive with the getaway car? Where is Berg? Where is he?

Over and over, the same questions, the monotonous voice, the asking and asking.

And always the same answer: "I don't know. I don't know."

When did Berg arrive in Portland? Where did he live there? Did you help plan the stick-up? Where is Sandoz? Who else was in it?

"I don't know."

"Answer me! We're going to stay until you talk. I can hold out longer than you can. It's my business. My job. Where's Berg?"

"I don't know."

At three o'clock I stood and stretched and moved about the room. I wondered if anyone would approve of what I was doing. I supposed there could be lifted eyebrows. I wasn't thinking about those things. I wasn't thinking if I was right or wrong. I wanted Berg. I wanted answers. I wanted to find out where . . . and why.

I turned to her. "Mary—why did you do this to me?"

She looked up and her eyes were steady.

"I fell in love with you, Al."

"So you cased a bank job for your boyfriend and went on the lam with him. Love? You want me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

I went over to her and lifted her head with a hand under her chin.

"Listen, Mary, I don't fall for it. Don't misinterpret that kiss. No matter what I felt—I'm a cop. I'm going to get Berg and Sandoz. I'm going to clean this up."

"That's what you want more than anything," she said tonelessly.

"That's what I want more than anything."

She looked at me a long time and whatever she thought failed to come into her expression. Whatever she felt, she hid.

"All right," she said quietly. "If a woman loves a man, she does what he wants."

I waited.

She said, "I didn't want to tell you. A woman wants to keep as much as she can with the man she loves. She doesn't want to hurt him; she doesn't want to let him see her soul if it's soiled. But you want to know . . . more than anything else."

"That's right."

I LIVED here in Butte," she said. "When I was seventeen I went to Los Angeles and to business college for two years, and tried to take care of my kid sister. 'Tried to' is good! I told you about her. After I finished school, she got a job and met the wrong man—not Berg. He needed some money and talked her into borrowing from the firm's petty cash. He was going to return it in a few days. She never saw him again.

"I had to get up the money to replace it. Neither of us had any place to raise it. I met Berg in a night club, and he offered to give it to me. I replaced it. Then one night, I was out in Berg's car and we were picked up. It seems a filling station had been robbed just before Berg picked me up. That didn't make any difference. They had Berg cold and I was an accomplice. I did a term in prison.

"When I got out, I couldn't find a job because of my record. I figured I might have better luck in Portland, so I went there. I should have changed my name, or chosen a different place. I should have done a lot of things, but I didn't. Then Berg showed up in Portland a month ago. We met by accident on the street."

"Did you send for him?" I snapped.

She swallowed. "I told you it was by accident. And no matter what they say, I was never . . . Berg's girl. You—you'll have to believe that."

"And you told him about the bank set-up?"

"Don't, Al. Please let me finish," she pleaded.

"Go ahead."

"He found out where I worked. He found out about you, too. Then he came to my apartment one night and said I was going to help with the bank job or he'd let them know about me. He said he'd do a lot of things. That he'd make sure you found out all there was to know about me."

She stopped speaking and looked at me.

"Whatever you might say to that, Al, there's one thing I know," she continued. "You're a cop. A good cop. No matter how you might feel about me, you'd still be a cop. I didn't have a chance."

She hesitated again.

"Go on. Finish it," I said.

"Al, I didn't drive the getaway car. That was Martha Sandoz. I was home that morning packing. I was going to run again."

"But you went with him."

"They came to the apartment after the stick-up. In the shooting Sandoz was hit. Not bad, but enough that he had to be bandaged. Then they made me go with them. After that—well, I was in it. I just gave up. When they needed things and asked me to pass some money, I tried it. I was in too far to do anything else. You'd broadcast the serial numbers. I was caught."

My jaw muscles were aching from tension.

"Where did they plan to go from here?" I said. "You were picked up. They wouldn't stay."

She took a deep breath and shook her head wearily.

"They're still here. They have to be. Sandoz has blood poisoning. I think he's dying, and they don't dare call a doctor. Martha won't leave him."

"Berg would."

She shook her head again.

"Somehow Martha got the money. She's hidden it, except for a little of it. She says

Berg has to stay until Sandoz can travel. Berg will take the risk—or stay until he can find the money."

"He'll think you'll talk."

"No. I—I didn't once before. In San Francisco. Besides, I still have my kid sister in Los Angeles. He told me once what would happen to her if I ever did talk, or get out of line."

I stared at her and felt a sudden confusion.

"But you're talking now," I said.

The tears were there again. "I told you, Al—I love you. You—you asked. The thing you wanted most."

PERHAPS I should have taken some Butte men with me. That's standard procedure. But this was a personal thing, suddenly more personal than it had ever been.

The desk sergeant looked puzzled and worried, but Clay had left orders and he let me have the car and take her with me.

There was mountain coldness in the grey false dawn. I drove silently with Mary sitting close beside me, and the streets brought memories.

We stopped quietly at a disreputable-looking motel. It looked like a place where a proprietor would have connections that paid him good money from the wrong side of the law.

Mary pointed out two doors. For a second I felt a deep anger when I realized that she meant one unit had been occupied by the two of them.

She must have sensed it because her hand went to my arm so that I looked at her.

"No, Al. I'm not his girl."

I pulled a gun and went to the door. It was locked. Then I saw the light below the blind in the other unit and went to the other door. It was unlocked and inside someone moaned.

I opened the door and went in.

Sandoz was in the bed. He looked sick

enough to die. A woman sat by the bed looking at him in tears. Berg stood beside her. They heard the door open and turned. I motioned with the gun.

"Fold your hands on top of your head, Berg. Come out."

Mary was beside me. I could feel her pressing slightly against my left arm. Berg glanced at her and said something under his breath, but his hands went up. The woman glared at us angrily, and the man in bed stopped moaning and opened his eyes. He raised his head a little to look at us.

"Come out, Berg," I said again.

He came toward the door, passing between us and the bed.

Mary screamed and somehow was in front of me, protecting me. The shots were startlingly loud in the small room.

Berg went down first. Then Mary staggered back against me and crumpled to the floor. I shot at the bed and the man who had pulled the gun from beneath the covers. I only had to shoot once. The woman screamed and stared at her husband.

I glanced down and saw the dampness that was spreading from beneath Mary's body.

THE doctor was middle-aged and thin. He came out of the room briskly and Clay stepped away from the wall where we'd been leaning.

"Doc," he said, "this is Lieutenant Kingsley from Portland. Technically she's his prisoner."

The doctor shook hands with me.

"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant. I suppose you want to know about your prisoner."

"Yes."

"Shoulder wound. Missed the bones. Lucky. She'll be able to travel in a week or so."

"She's going to be all right?"

"She'll never have trouble serving her sentence," he said tightly. "Too bad. Nice

appearing girl." He shook his head and turned to leave, but stopped and looked at me again. "I hear she stopped a bullet intended for you. Be nice to her, Lieutenant. You can see her now."

I nodded curtly and went to the door.

She opened her eyes when I went in. I closed the door behind me and went over to the bed and looked down at her.

"Al! Al, are you all right?" she said.

"I'm fine." I smiled and reached for her hand. "But in debt. I owe you one life. One cop's life."

She smiled a little and her fingers pressed against mine.

"You don't owe me anything," she whispered.

"You're going to be all right," I said.

"My shoulder, you mean?"

I nodded.

"Al—what about me? What are they going to do to me?"

"You get some sleep and let me do the worrying. Okay?"

Her eyes searched my face. I managed a smile that I didn't feel.

"Okay," she said. "If you say so, Al. Anything you say."

I kissed her cheek and went out. Clay was waiting for me. We walked down the hallway and went outside without speaking. We got in the police car.

Then he said, "You're in a spot, Al."

"Yes."

"Anything I can do?"

"Drive me to the station," I said. "I want to talk with Martha Sandoz."

CLAY let me use the same room I'd used to question Mary. Martha Sandoz stood with her back to the closed door, exactly where the matron had left her, and all the hatred that a woman can feel was in her eyes as she looked at me.

I got up from behind the desk and went around and leaned back against it, my hands flat on its surface.

"What else could I do?" I said.

"You killed him."

"I didn't want to kill him, but I had to stop him. I didn't have a choice."

"You're a cop. You have to kill. It's all you know."

I clamped my teeth to bite back my anger. The palms of my hands were damp on the desk top.

I said, "Mary says the men kidnaped her. Made her go against her will. That she didn't drive the getaway car. That you did. Is that right?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"She's a cop-lover. I told them, but they wouldn't listen."

"She's going to take a rap if you don't tell the truth."

"I'm laughing, copper. I'll still be laughing ten years from now when she watches that cute little body of hers dry up in prison. When her hair starts to turn grey. When the wrinkles come. I'll have a hell of a good laugh, copper. At her—and at *you*."

"Leave me out of it. Give her a break."

"Listen, Mr. Cop. You want her more than anything in the world. You can't fool me. And she wants you. I don't give a damn about her—but I do about you. You killed my husband. I'll do anything I can to hurt you—or anyone who belongs to you. As far as I'm concerned she was Berg's girl. She was in it from the start. She's guilty. That's my story—you damned killer!"

The thin thread of control in me snapped. I had her in my hands, my fingers in her shoulders, my face close to hers.

"Listen," I said quietly. "He'd already shot my girl. He'd killed a man. He was trying to kill me. But most of all he'd shot Mary. Wouldn't you have killed for Sandoz?"

She was motionless, her eyes still closed, her breathing shallow. A good-looking dark-haired woman in her thirties.

I took a deep breath and struggled to break my own silence. I know what I had to say. I hated it.

Slowly I said, "I never thought I'd ask a prisoner for a favor. I never thought I'd plead with anyone. But I am. Not as a cop, but as a man. Listen to me, Martha—I love her as much as you loved him. I fought for her then—as you're still fighting for him now. Only your fight's no good now, Martha. It can't be. You know it can't be."

She didn't move.

I said, "If you have to do something in his memory . . . do something decent. Give a girl and a man a break. Keep it alive—what you and George had. Keep it alive with someone else. You can do it by clearing Mary. Just by telling the truth."

Perspiration dampened my forehead. A trickle of blood slid down my chin from a scratch she had made.

"Martha, revenge won't buy a thing—but you can give orchids to the living."

There wasn't anything more to say. I felt stripped and exhausted of emotion. Anger had drained completely out of me. Pride was something I'd had the day before. There wasn't anything left but her answer.

She opened her eyes and looked at me for a long moment. I heard our breathing and I saw the paleness of her lips. The scratches on my face began to smart. The smell of the old building was heavy.

Then, abruptly, those pale lips of hers smiled a little and her eyes became moist.

"That isn't the way George would have said it," she told me softly. "He sort of had a way with words. Kind of a funny sense of humor. I think George would have grinned kind of lopsided and he'd have said, 'orange blossoms'—orange blossoms to the bride and groom, copper."

Maybe some people thought it was strange that a prisoner was the matron of honor for Mary, but we didn't. Neither did Clay.

"Anything can happen in Butte!" he said, grinning, just before he kissed the blushing bride.

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"Missing Men"

Out of the grave came the rope with which Nem Parsons, pride of the Bridgehaven police, intended to hang—a dead man!

CHAPTER ONE

The Frightened Woman

NEM PARSONS lumbered heavily up the hill that led to the dilapidated Sorel homestead. He lagged upon his errand, partly from a certain reluctance induced by the nature of his mission; partly because he found himself thinking clearly about the affair for the first time since the report of Terry Crown's disappearance had come into police headquarters.

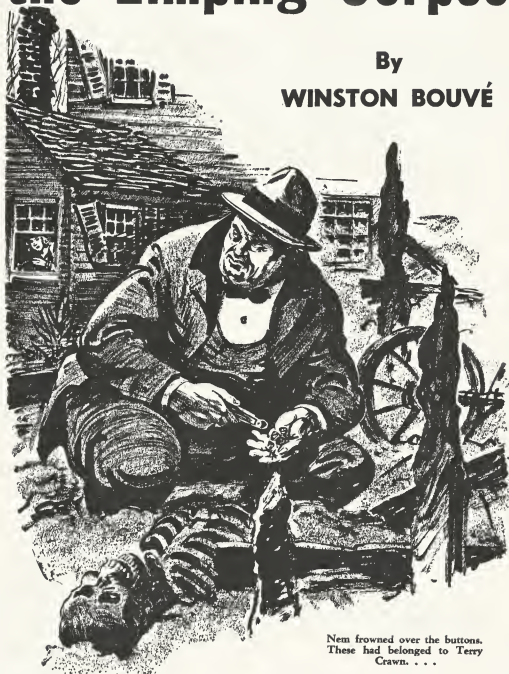
He reached the crest of the hill, a big,

elephantine figure in flapping grey clothes that needed pressing, surmounted by a large bald head that was somehow babyish, with its bland blue eyes and puckered, kindly mouth. Puffing and blowing from his climb, he looked about him.

It was a desolate vista he saw on this late November afternoon. Barren fields stretched away on either side of the dirt road; beyond the pasturage on his right lay

Case of the Limping Corpse

By
WINSTON BOUVÉ



Nem frowned over the buttons.
These had belonged to Terry
Crawn. . . .

a gaunt grove of denuded poplars, bleak and bare against the cold yellow horizon. And on the detective's left stood the house that was his journey's end.

It was just such a house as should have reared forbidding walls on a lonely hilltop. A large, rambling structure, badly in need of paint, it presented a gloomy, shuttered front to the visitor.

The sole sign of life about the place was the smoke rising from a rear chimney. Nem Parsons knew that the fallen fortunes of the Sorels kept Dolly Sorel, whom he had known ten years earlier as Dolly Soames, the prettiest girl in Bridgehaven, more tied to the kitchen than any farmer's wife in the vicinity.

But before he picked his way across the lawn, ill kept and sodden with the wet rot of decaying leaves, to the rear of the old house, he viewed the latest calamity that had befallen the Sorels.

Two hundred yards beyond the house lay the blackened hulk of the barn that had burned to the ground three nights before. The once-imposing building was reduced to a charred chaos of half-burned timbers. The iron framework of implements, just discernible beneath the sinister pile of rain-soaked ashes, suggested to Nem's imaginative brain the skeleton of some monstrous creature.

Too bad that this last blow should have fallen upon Dolly Sorel's frail shoulders, he thought. Surely, she had endured enough in the ten years of her marriage to worthless Pete Sorel.

Nem Parsons' round, good-natured face settled into graven distaste as he thought of Pete Sorel, who had squandered everything his father had left him; who had taken Dolly Soames away from the man she should have married—Terry Crawn—only to bring shame and sorrow upon her. And if Bridgehaven gossip was to be trusted, Pete Sorel had a murderous temper and a taste for liquor.

Dolly was too proud to ever admit the

truth of the gossip that spread Sorel's brutalities. But the man's violence was too well known. Everyone knew that she was often the victim of his senseless, drunken rages.

Little wonder that Nem Parsons was reluctant to knock on the kitchen door, put her to an ordeal harder than any she had yet endured.

THE woman who answered his rap bore little enough resemblance to the satin-cheeked, merry girl all Bridgehaven had known. Dolly Sorel was a bent, work-worn woman. Her haggard features retained few traces of their former beauty. Her thin, shabbily clad body had lost its elasticity.

The shabby slippers she wore made her gait a shuffle. Her eyes, wells of misery, but clearly, darkly blue, were the sole survivors of the prettiness that had been Dolly Soames'. That and her rather untidy fair hair, which no neglect could tarnish, fine as corn-silk, were still left to her.

Respectfully, Nem lifted his hat, read the startled question in her eyes, and realized, with a pang of pity, that life had cowed the lovely Dolly into fearing everything.

"It's—it's Henry Parsons, isn't it?"

So she remembered him, thought of him in that fashion, rather than as Police Chief O'Malley's right-hand man.

"From headquarters," he had to explain.

Helplessly, she gestured him into the big, bare kitchen.

"I—I don't think I understand."

But her work-worn hand crept to her throat, and Nem, known to the official and criminal world as "Nemesis" Parsons because he never failed to bag his man, knew fresh pity for her. To be the wife of Pete Sorel meant to live in continual dread. The man was worthless in every sense of the word, and utterly averse to honest work. How he got the money he sometimes flashed in cheap resorts of pleasure was a speculation.

Nem cleared his throat. There was noth-

ing to be gained by unnecessary delay.

"Old Mrs. Shattuck, who keeps house for your nearest neighbor, Terry Crawn, came into headquarters this morning to say Crawn had been gone since Monday night. No one's seen him since then. This being Friday, she was kind of upset."

The old detective's attention was apparently riveted on the simple process of filling his pipe with a leisurely thumb. In fact, though, his childlike blue eyes missed no slightest expression or movement on Dolly Sorel's part.

"I came straight up here because Mrs. Shattuck said your husband was up to Terry's farm Monday evening, around supper time. They quarreled, Dolly. Pete was drunk—pretty ugly."

"I know," said Pete Sorel's wife.

Her blue eyes stared at him piteously. Nem cleared his throat.

"Pete went up to Terry's place to bluster around and threaten him into keeping his mouth shut—about how he treated you, Mis' Shattuck says. Terry was always mighty fond of you. He only laughed in that devil-may-care way of his, and he did some threatening on his own account. Pete was mad, all right. He brandished a revolver around, vowing he'd kill Terry if he came near this place again—and then Terry threw him out."

Dolly maintained her apathetic air.

"He came back in a terrible temper—worse than I've ever seen him," she said dully.

Nem nodded thoughtfully.

"That was what Terry thought, according to Mis' Shattuck. He got to worrying hard about what Pete might go home and do to you. So after he came in from his night chores, about nine o'clock, Terry said he was coming down here. He started out—and no one's seen him since. That's what brought me here, Dolly. Where's Pete?"

Dolly Sorel shook her fair head.

"I don't know. He hasn't been near the

place, so far as I know, since Monday night. Lord knows he stays away for days—weeks—at a time often enough. I haven't worried much—but he didn't even show up when the barn burned down."

Nem could see from the kitchen window the blackened ruins. He pressed down his pipe ashes with a nervous forefinger, blinked thoughtfully.

"Too bad about the barn, Dolly. That happened Monday night late, didn't it? The same night Terry Crawn was supposed to be down here. Didn't I hear you weren't on the place when it happened?"

Dolly Sorel's hands tightened on the arms of her rocker.

"It's true. When he came down from Terry's, he was in such a rage I didn't dare stay in the house. So about half past eight or so I went down to Martha Stevens, and stayed overnight with her. It was dawn when Martha shook me awake, told me our barn was burning. It was too late to save anything then. We hurried down—found Pete gone; saw the roof crash in. If he'd been here he might have saved the horses," she added bitterly.

Her convincing if brief recital of the night in question disappointed old Nem. He had hoped for more from her. He knew, regretfully, that her story of her absence could be all too easily proven, for Martha Stevens was an entirely reliable woman.

"Kind of queer the way the barn took fire, wasn't it?" There was only the politest interest in his voice.

Dolly sighed as if she were weary of trying to solve the mysterious disaster.

"Must have been a tramp sleeping there, unknown to us," she said apathetically.

Nem heaved himself out of his rocker, strolled casually across the kitchen. It was a neat, if barren, room, and it showed the pathetic efforts of the pretty, beaten woman who was mistress there, to make it livable and pleasant. Faded but immaculate gingham framed the windows; a canary bird twittered spasmodically in its cage. Dolly

had nurtured some begonias in the south window. It was above their hardy flowering that he saw the black hulk of the barn, the cold, bleak, November skyline.

HE KNEW that this wing of the house was all that was kept up of the forlorn old mansion, but Dolly had done her best. Within the past few months the kitchen and sitting-room beyond had been newly plastered against the encroaching years, the floor filled and painted. But Parsons was not thinking of the woman's spirited battle against dry rot as he laid one big hand on the yellowish wall.

"Plaster's kind of damaged over here by the sink, ain't it?" he asked gently.

She followed his gesture with a swift, darting look.

His big forefinger touched the chipped depression thoughtfully.

"A bullet might have done that," he observed. "A bullet that went astray."

He scanned her sudden pallor acutely.

"You don't mean—"

Both hands crept to her thin white throat.

"Just doin' a little headwork, Dolly. Figuring out what might have happened the night Terry Crown came down here, after you'd gone over to Mis' Stevens'. We know he came down here to have words with Pete; we know Pete was in one of his tempers, talking of gunplay. He'd already threatened Terry—and he was bad actor enough to live up to his word, especially when he was full of luqoor. We know that Terry wasn't seen afterward—that Pete's missing."

She leaned against the wall, ashen pale. Her blue eyes were smudged with anxious dread.

"You think Pete killed him!" Her voice was thin, brittle as glass.

"If I were Pete Sorel and found myself alone in the house with a man I'd shot down in hot blood, I'd most likely be crazy with fear. I'd see what I'd done, remember my threats—think of the noose, most likely—"

"It—it can't be true!" Dolly Sorel said dazedly. "If it were, there'd be some sign . . . the body . . ."

Her wretched gaze pleaded for acceptance of her words. Her hands worked convulsively as she twisted her apron hem.

Nem Parsons fingered the flowering plant in the south window. But he looked past the pinkish bloom, straight into the charred chaos of ruin that had been the once stately barn.

"If I were Pete, and trapped into murder by my own black temper, I'd seize on some way to hide what I'd done. Fire's a great destroyer. I might figure there'd be nothing left of my crime, if the blaze was hot enough."

He saw she knew what he meant. Horror left her speechless. She could only follow his gaze, stare fixedly at the blackened desolation two hundred yards away.

"Better go lie down, Dolly," he advised kindly. "You look tuckered out. I'm going to poke about out there for a while."

He nodded toward the ruins, and moved to the door.

The afternoon light was waning. Old Nem knew that he had but a short stretch of daylight left in which to perform his gruesome task. When he reached the hulking ruins he studied its ground plan for a moment.

The destruction was as nearly complete as that of any burned building he had ever seen. It had been filled with hay and straw, of course, and there had been no fire-fighting equipment available, even had the alarm been given in time.

CHAPTER TWO

Sure as Death

NEM, coat collar turned up against the chill autumn wind, whistled soundlessly. Lucky for him that it was an old-fashioned barn without a basement, so that the monstrous heap of ashes lay above ground!

The iron framework of a farm wagon told him where the barn floor had been, and the steel remnants of farm implements, plus the charred skeletons of two horses and a cow, designated the stables.

The old detective found an ancient rake handle lying back against the barnyard fence. With this as his tool he probed into that pile of fine grey ash that represented the remains of the haymow. For reasonably enough he deduced that if, as he was sure, murder had been done, and the murderer had wanted to dispose of the corpse by burning the barn, he would have chosen the haymow to burn it in, where combustion would be most violent and incineration most complete.

Hating his task, yet bending his energies to it, Nem stepped out upon the three-foot pile of rain-soaked ash and began his probing.

He had not proceeded far when the rake handle met an obstruction that his instinct told him was what he sought. He laid aside his rake handle and, leaning over at an angle difficult indeed for a man of his unwieldy bulk, began to scoop away the ashes very carefully in handfuls. He was too sagacious to take undue chances with anything that might lie near the body.

Presently he came to it—the charred and blackened skeleton of a man. With infinite care now, his breath whistling between his teeth as he worked, Nem laid it bare to the grey November sky. Nothing remained of it but the bare bones and the metal objects the man had worn.

Nem found first marred metal buttons of some odd design. He frowned over these, then suddenly remembered that Terry Crawn had served in the artillery during the war. The merry, fair-haired young man still wore the Army jacket now and then, and the garment boasted buttons such as these had been. Next he found a knife burned to hasp and blades, close beside the works of a watch from which the case had been melted away. Other cheap metal but-

tons he uncovered; the remains of a stick-pin, the eyelets from the dead man's shoes; even the nails of the shoes. All these he collected with the utmost care.

For a moment he frowned over the shoe nails, weighing them thoughtfully in his big palm. The nails that had been in the heel of the left shoe were a full half inch longer than those belonging to the right heel. The difference was worth noting to his methodical mind. He separated them, did not stow them away until he had folded the longer nails into a leaf torn from his notebook.

His task was almost done. He was covering the ghastly remains of Terry Crawn with a tattered strip of canvas he had taken from a nearby fence when a faint voice spoke his name.

He straightened to see Dolly Sorel descending the kitchen steps, bareheaded, shivering in a worn grey sweater, looking thin and worn against the streaky, lemon-hued sky. He went toward her, lest she come closer and see what had best not be seen.

"Yes, Dolly."

"I had to come out. Did you find . . . anything?"

His round, genial face was puckered like a thoughtful child's.

"I did, Dolly," he told her gently, and supported her as she swayed, paled.

His eyes were kind, for he knew that she had loved Terry Crawn, before bad treatment and misery had deadened her capacity for loving.

"You mean—you mean what you thought would happen, did happen?" Her eyes strayed past him to the dirty canvas shroud. "Terry—oh, God! But are you sure? Mightn't it be a—a tramp?"

Desperately she hung on his reply, hands plucking at her sweater.

Nem had to shake his head.

"No, Dolly. He's past all recognition, of course, but the bronze buttons from that old Army jacket he wore so much didn't burn; nor the knife I've seen him carry."

She steadied herself with an effort.

"Then—Pete?"

"Is a hunted man," said Nem gravely. "We'll have to put out a dragnet for him. It was murder, Dolly. The flames failed Pete; they didn't quite destroy. Terry's skull was bored through with a bullet from that automatic of Pete's."

Dolly Sorel's lashes fluttered. But now that she knew the truth she seemed less likely to collapse; even relieved of her haunting dread.

Nem Parsons urged her into the house with a kindly hand on her arm.

"Better get some rest, Dolly. You look worn out. Too bad—too bad!" He sighed gustily. "Funny, I never guessed Terry Crawn's left leg was a mite shorter'n his right—with that swinging stride of his, too—"

His words must have suddenly summoned up the dead man to Dolly's vision. She uttered a wild, choked cry and hid her face in her hands.

"Yes, but he wasn't lame at all. How did you know?"

He showed her the nails that had been burned out of the dead man's shoe heels, with a terse word of explanation. She shivered away from these mute evidences of the holocaust. And thoughtfully, compassionately, Nem watched her creep along the hall to the bleak sitting room, while he notified headquarters of his gruesome find.

THREE days later the tragic remains of the young man were buried in a closed coffin from Terry Crawn's farmhouse. The entire countryside was there en masse. For reasons of his own Nem Parsons left his battered desk at headquarters and joined the throng of mourners at the house and the grave.

But Dolly Sorel was not there. Nem could understand the delicacy that kept her in seclusion. As he moved among the friends and neighbors of the dead man he overheard enough whispered comment to

realize the poignancy of her position and ponder upon it.

It was from old Mrs. Shattuck that he learned of Dolly's illness, of the presence of Martha Stevens at the gloomy Sorel house.

"Too bad!" he commented sympathetically.

The old woman who had kept house for Terry Crawn since he had bought the ramshackle place pulled her shawl tighter about her, and pursed her lips grimly.

"If you ask me, Mr. Parsons, it ain't anything but—guilt."

Nem shook his enormous head reproachfully.

"Why Mis' Shattuck! You don't mean to say that folks hereabouts think Dolly Sorel was implicated in Pete's crime? Dolly, she wouldn't harm a fly!"

His mild blue eyes flickered across her set face.

"She'd turn to Terry Crawn quick enough for help when she knew that devil, Sorel, was ready to kill him in his black tempers! Turn to Terry, knowing he'd do anything for her, even if she did jilt him for that worthless scamp! And now—now—I wouldn't be a mite surprised if she'd helped Pete Sorel escape, after he killed Terry. Mark my words, she'll stick by that blackguard, like all women of her kind!"

"Loyal!" murmured Nem, and slowly got up to go.

"Call it that if you like!" Mrs. Shattuck glowered.

But he didn't call it anything as he plodded across the frost-hardened fields to the Sorel homestead. He was brooding upon all that he had heard whispered, all that he knew of the late tragedy.

Dolly Sorel herself came to the door, looking wan and ill, but more cheerful than he had hoped to find her. She was alone. Martha Stevens had left earlier in the day.

"Sorry you've been ill, Dolly," he said sympathetically.

"I'm better." She managed the ghost of

a smile. "I . . . It hasn't been an easy time."

Nem wondered that her solitude was not more hag-ridden. She seemed calm enough—dazed rather than sorrowing. He had to remind himself that Terry Crawn's death, after all, harrowing as its attendant circumstances were, was no real parting. Life had sundered the two who had been lovers far more effectually than death can ever do.

Dolly had been a faithful wife, loyal to her wretched choice. Of that Nem was sure. So sure that he hedged now for an opening.

"Think there's any chance of Pete's showing up here again, Dolly?"

She started. Those dark blue eyes of hers betrayed how startling the suggestion was to her.

"I . . . Oh, I can't think that!"

Nem regarded his soft, wrinkled leather shoes affectionately.

"Don't you think he'd feel pretty sure of you, in case he needed a hiding place or money?" he asked mildly.

He did not give her time to reply. His keen sense of smell caught a whiff of acrid odor that seemed to come from the kitchen. A pungent, familiar odor.

"What's that? Something burning?" he demanded sharply.

Her fair head moved in the direction of the kitchen.

"N-Nothing," she assured him. "Nothing but some rubbish, that is."

He relaxed, recalled her to the point he had made. Dolly twisted her black dress helplessly.

"You think he'll come back?" she whispered.

"Hard to tell. All I want to know is what you'd do if he should."

HE SAW one hand steal to her upper arm, run up and down the thin shoulder, as one strokes a hurt. She seemed to be remembering some ugly and best-forgotten thing. Nem guessed the shabby black sleeve concealed traces of the missing man's

brutality. He searched Dolly's bitter, brooding face.

"What would I do?" she spoke slowly, haltingly. "I'd see justice done." She sent him a swift, pleading look. "That's all I want. Justice!"

Her answer seemed to satisfy him.

"I'll have to tell you that a broadside for Pete has gone out already."

"A broadside?"

"Yes. Handbills to the police in every city. Posters offering rewards for him, and all that. Only, the photograph I got from some old newspaper files isn't much good. I came to see if you had a more recent one we could use in making up the posters."

Nem put his request almost apologetically. A faint flush stained Dolly's high cheekbones.

"Queer that you should come to me for my husband's picture for such a purpose!" she said, but she rose. "I've got a picture of him upstairs. I'll get it."

"Fine."

She disappeared into the hall, and Nem heard her ascending feet on the carpetless stairs.

This was the opportunity he had sought. With a catlike tread, so swift and silent one could scarcely have believed it possible of his ponderous bulk, the grizzled detective lifted the lid of the stove. There he discovered that his sense of smell had not deceived him.

Dolly Sorel had been burning just that which he had guessed was smoldering away in the coal stove! Nem seized the tongs, withdrew a smoking, blackened object, peered at it curiously.

As he looked, his mind leaped back to the conclusion he had arrived at once before, only to distrust it, deem it impossible.

He heard Dolly Sorel moving about upstairs, and swiftly he replaced the "rubbish" she had been burning, put back the stove lid, and returned to the sitting room as quietly as he had left it. When Dolly returned a moment later with a cabinet

photograph in her hand, he was looking out at the bleak November landscape, with its soughing, denuded trees.

"Thanks a lot, Dolly," he told her, stowing away the likeness of the missing man, after a searching glance at the swaggering dark good looks of the sepia print. "It's a whole lot better to work with us than against us in a case like this. And—Terry was always a good friend to you!"

"The best I ever had," she said simply, and pressed her hands to her bosom.

Nem lumbered toward the door, paused for a last word.

"If Pete should come back, you'll notify us, won't you?"

Her dark blue eyes stared at him from her small, pale face.

"If Pete comes back, I'll tell you!" she promised.

Nem took the trolley back to Bridgehaven. But instead of going straight to headquarters, he determined to follow out the clew he had gathered from the contents of Dolly Sorel's kitchen stove. He got a transfer in the center of the city, and took a southbound trolley that led him down into the mill section.

A sordid, cosmopolitan quarter, it was jammed with dark little stores, hung with festoons of garlic and strange cheeses and sausages. Pushcarts stocked with fruit and vegetables and bright-colored small wares lined the curbing, surrounded by women bargaining with the peddlers or scolding with high-pitched violence the children who tagged at their skirts.

Nem threaded his way gingerly through this medley, his gaze alert for what he sought. His enormous feet, which he pampered tenderly, pained him from his unaccustomed exertions that day, and these cobbled streets did not mitigate his discomfort. He uttered a pathetic grunt as a bundle-laden woman brushed past, treading on one sensitive, leather-shod foot. And then, as he grumbled to himself, he found the number he was looking for.

A small shoemaker's shop occupied the basement of the dingy brick tenement house. Nem glimpsed the worn plush cushions of the shoe-shine stand, descended the chipped steps.

He mounted the stand, submitted his broad-toed shoes to the deft manipulation of the cobbler. As he rested, he looked about him. The dark back room, visible from Nem's vantage point, offered a vista of rows of special lasts, beyond the work table where shoe patterns were being cut.

"You make a lot of shoes here, eh?" he inquired of the proprietor, as he paid for his services, and added a liberal tip.

"The best you buy anywhere!" Flashing white teeth made a rift in the olive-hued face.

Nem leaned confidentially across the counter.

"Quite a lot of orders, haven't you? I wonder if—"

The shoemaker answered the low-voiced question without an instant's hesitation.

"Him? Sure. I make shoes for him eight—ten years! Nice-looking feller, him—all the ladies think so, anyway—and he—what you say—limped!"

Nem smoothed his dimpled chin thoughtfully.

"I see," he ruminated at length. "I just wanted to be sure. Thanks, Tony."

HIS next port of call was a very different building in a very different section of the city. It was the big post office. And it was the postmaster, Franklin, from whom Nem gained an instant hearing.

The shabby, diffident old detective was shown into a private office, shook hands with the postmaster.

"Could you make it possible for me to have a look at the mail the rural carrier takes to and gets from Mrs. Pete Sorel?" Nem asked amiably, crossing his gargantuan knees so that his white socks showed.

Franklin nodded crisply.

"I'd do a good deal more than that, Mr.

Parsons, to see Pete Sorel strapped in the chair where he belongs. There never was a finer fellow than young Crawn—everyone liked and respected him. Too bad! If holding back the Sorel mail each day will help—come along, Parsons. The last mail has been sorted to be taken out tomorrow morning.”

“Might as well see what there is,” assented Nem.

He followed his guide out through long dark stacks of cabinets, past innumerable mail sacks, past long sorting tables presided over by lightning-fast clerks. At the rear of the room, Franklin spied a freckle-faced young man, hailed him.

“This is Mr. Parsons, police detective specially assigned to the Crawn murder case, Mulvaney. Mulvaney is rural carrier on that route, Mr. Parsons. Mr. Parsons is interested in the mail Mrs. Sorel gets and sends; tell him if you’ve noticed anything special.”

The carrier rubbed his ear, eyeing Nem with keen interest.

“No letters addressed to her husband, or coming in his handwriting,” the young man declared. “I’ve carried mail enough for Pete Sorel to know his writing, too. Fact is, Mrs. Sorel hasn’t been getting any mail out of the ordinary. I know where most of her letters come from—she doesn’t get many. But—but—”

Nem encouraged him with a chuckle:

“Kind of good on detective work yourself, aren’t you? You’re telling me pretty much what I want to know. But what?”

“It may not mean anything, but Mrs. Sorel has subscribed all at once to a daily newspaper from Boston—the *American*—and she never took anything but a Bridgehaven paper before. Do you s’pose there’s anything in it?”

Nem’s blue eyes twinkled as he prepared to take his departure.

“Big-city papers usually are kind o’ meaty, aren’t they?” he asked innocently, and thanked them both.

He lumbered out into the falling darkness, turned up his coat collar against the late November chill. A snow flurry threatened. Around the next corner lay the imposing brick edifice that was the public library, and toward its lighted entry Nem directed his steps doggedly.

Inside, he went straight to the newspaper rack, asked for and got the Boston *American* for the past week, and then, his trophies tucked under his arm, he found an empty table and commenced his task.

It was in the paper of the previous day that he found the tiny block of print that meant so much to him. Ironically enough it was tucked away on the third page, directly under the lurid chronicle of the Crawn murder, which was still splashing red headlines across the daily news sheets.

This is what Parsons read in the personal column.

Doll: Must see you soon. Will wait for you private dining room, Brewster, Wednesday evening, six o’clock. Grateful for everything. Still beg forgiveness. Bad Boy.

Nem leaned back, drumming with his big hands on the polished table, blinking at the green-shaded light like an astonished infant.

Pete Sorel’s wife had been known as “Doll” Soames, because of her flaxen hair, her doll-like prettiness, and the name still clung to her with her old friends and her family. And—she had subscribed to this newspaper! He nodded his cherubic head in a sort of mournful satisfaction. The net was closing in about the fugitive.

* * *

Nem had a great many facts and theories to marshal when he reached his own shabby office at headquarters. There, without turning on the light, though the twilight was deepening to darkness outside and the street lights were shining, he leaned back in his chair, freed his aching feet from his shoes

with a gusty sigh of relief and elevated them to his desk-top.

He thought for a long time, smiled dreamily to see how his pet theory promised to be proven in this particular case once more. Give a man rope enough, Nem had always obstinately declared, and he will make a noose of it! Give him confidence in his own safety, and he will become careless in very security. This case of Pete Sorel—one of the cleverest dodges Nem had ever seen worked out—would prove his point anew. And yet . . .

Nem sighed regretfully, turned as the door opened, and Chief O'Malley stood limned by the lighted outer office.

"You old mole!" he greeted his assistant. "Did you get Sorel's photograph? Fine. We've got to hustle this case and lay our hands on Pete Sorel, Nem. Terry Crawn was mighty popular around here, and I've had some sharp digs for not putting hands on him sooner. We can't afford to let him skip the country."

Nem leaned back and lit a cigar.

"He won't."

O'Malley grunted.

"What makes you so sure of it?"

Nem eyed his superior with a mournful certainty that was affecting in the extreme.

"Don't I mostly know what I'm talkin' about, Tom? I do this time. Don't rush me on this Sorel business. I got to have a little time."

The lanky chief of police thrust his fingers through his rusty crest.

"If you weren't sure as—as death, Nem, I'd give you hell for keeping to yourself whatever hunch you've got. I need some assurance to give out to the papers."

"And I need some time," mused Nem placidly. "Don't look so glum, Tom. I'll tell you this much. I can lay my hands on Pete Sorel any time I want to."

To his superior's explosive questioning he answered, "How come? Oh, just because women are so damn loyal that they defeat their own ends, sometimes."

And with that cryptic comment he thrust his feet into his shoes, reached for his hat and bent his steps toward home.

CHAPTER THREE

Rendezvous in Terror

IT WAS in Sunday's paper that Nem had seen the notice in the agony column to which he pinned so much faith. Early Tuesday he called up the Sorel farmhouse, chatted pleasantly with Dolly, tried to make an appointment with her for Wednesday, failed, and hung up with a satisfied smile.

Just to verify his certainty he drove out to the farm the next day and found it utterly deserted, save for the black and white pet cat that prowled around the outside of the house—sure proof that Dolly had gone.

He dropped in for moment at Martha Stevens' on his way back to town, chatted with her briefly.

"Dolly Sorel certainly looks bad, poor dear," the loquacious, friendly woman assured him. "And no wonder, what with all that's happened. She's gone away for a few days to rest up. Maybe the change will do her good!"

"Maybe," said Nem meekly.

"She looked better just at the prospect of a little trip!" pursued his informant. "If you ask me, I think she's scared to death that maybe Pete will show up—an awful life he led her, yet I suppose she'd hate to see him come to the end he deserves!"

Nem agreed with her, took a polite leave and lumbered out to his rattle-trap little car.

He went directly to the station, bought a ticket to Boston, and settled himself in the smoker for the whole of the three-hour ride.

It was mid-afternoon when he got into South Station. He discovered that it was only a short walk to the Hotel Brewster, which was a small, third-rate hotel of a past era, and he made it on foot.

He looked like a misfit, oldish traveling

man as he entered the smoky, tiled lobby of the dreary hostelry—there were plenty of such men who sought out the place for its cheapness and its proximity to the railroad station—and he registered under an assumed name.

But after he had roamed idly through the dark, smelly corridors and studied briefly his seedily furnished room, he looked up the manager, showed his credentials.

"You have some private dining rooms here, haven't you?" he asked.

The wizened little man showed a sort of dry astonishment. Nem Parsons and a private dining room seemed a far-fetched combination.

"Not for myself," Nem added mildly. "I want to know who's reserved one for tonight, that's all."

"O-oh." The little man pursed his lips over Nem's identification, made a feint of looking up records as if he couldn't tell off-hand what notable reservations of a private dining room in such a dismal dump had been made for that very night!

"A Mr. Smith engaged it. Quite a young fellow, keeps to himself. He's expecting his sister down from the country."

The manager permitted a frosty smile to creep over his lips and acceded to Nem's mild demands forthwith.

Parsons investigated the dining room that had been assigned to the couple. It was a stuffy little room with a soiled red-velvet sofa, a cheap, bare table under a dusty chandelier; and most important of all to Nem's purposes, the baize-covered door that led into the adjacent serving pantry had a pane of glass in its upper panel through which any one hidden in the pantry could see all that transpired in the dining room. Access to the serving pantry was made possible by the back stairway, so that Nem could enter and leave at will without being suspected by the diners.

An order handed down by the management, plus a liberal tip from Nem's own pocket, made the regular waiter more than

amenable to the detective's suggestions.

AT A little after six that evening Nem ambled down the back stairway. He had been careful to keep out of the lobby and the main dining room, lest he be seen. But it was safe enough to take that rear route, slip unseen into the serving pantry, take from the waiter a soiled coat such as he himself wore, and put it on.

"That's fine," murmured Nem, adjusting a napkin over his arm, and cautiously he peered through the pane of glass in the green door.

His intuitions had not played him false.

Dolly Sorel sat at the farther side of the small table, laid for two, shabby enough in her small dark hat, obviously refurbished, and her cloth coat with its worn fur collar. But her face—that was transfigured. Nem watched her with a queer pang as she leaned forward, eyes fixed upon her companion, shabbily gloved hands gripping the table's edge.

Gone was her haggard pallor, her drawn, pathetic aspect. She was flushed, eager, intent upon her companion's every word. A tender woman who loved!

As for the man opposite her, Nem knew him instantly for the fugitive. The tall, slim figure in a badly cut grey coat sat back to Nem, but the poise of the head, the carriage, the quick gestures, betrayed an eagerness as alive as Dolly's.

The strange story was drawing to a swift close.

"Loyal Lord!" muttered Nem to himself, and backed clumsily away as the waiter came out bearing emptied soup plates.

The man spoke to him under his breath. "She's trying to get him to take money," he informed Nem, "and he won't do it."

Nem sighed. Never before had he been so reluctant to raise the curtain on the last act of the tragic dramas in which he found himself so often. Never before had he found his duty so distasteful. Usually a man who would kill his kind with malice was

anathema to Nem, and he found his role of avenging fate satisfying. But tonight . . .

"I'll take in the next course," he told the waiter.

The man carefully set out the main portion of the simple, ordered meal as it came up from the kitchen below. Nem balanced the tray easily on his broad hand, entered the little dining room quietly, and set down the load on the service table. Then he straightened, and met Dolly Sorel's eyes fixed upon him in a paroxysm of terror. Quick with the instinct of protection toward the man she loved, she had seemed to sense an alien, dangerous presence.

"Mr. Parsons!"

It was a strangled cry.

Her companion sprang up with a smothered word, and Nem whipped about. He smiled at his cornered quarry, a tragic smile. And the fugitive, with an expressive, simple gesture of both hands, stood in a sort of defeated dignity against the wall.

"You've got me, Mr. Parsons."

"Yes, Terry," admitted Nem, and nodded young Crawn back into his chair. "I have got you. I know you killed Pete Sorel. But tell me about it. I want to know just how guilty you are!"

The young fugitive rested his head on his hands.

"How did you ever guess, Mr. Parsons? I've read all the papers—every word about the crime—and not one gave a hint of doubt as to its being my body that was found!"

Nem lowered his weight into a chair, leaned forward.

"You were mighty clever, Terry, except for one thing. You planted everything else right—your own Army jacket, your knife, your watch—everything to make it appear that the man burned was you. But you either forgot, or didn't know, that Pete Sorel's left heel was half an inch higher than his right, on account of a slight lameness. And when I found out which one of you was lame I knew the truth. The nails in his boot heels were iron, and weren't destroyed,

you see." He sighed. "Tell me how it happened, Terry."

DOLLY SOREL'S blue eyes were upon Nem in a tear-blinded appeal that was the more tragic because it was mute.

Terry Crawn uttered a short, mirthless laugh, ran his hands through his hair.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know," he said. "How much is that? Everything, way back—my love for Dolly?"

Nem shook his head.

"I know all about that, Terry. Just tell me about that night when you left your place around and went to Sorel's."

"Oh." Terry knit his fair brows. "I went down to see if Dolly was all right—tell her that she had to break away from Pete, divorce him. But she'd gone over to Mrs. Stevens'. And Pete was sorer even than he had been because I came down. He started to draw on me with his gun. We went to the mat for it and wrestled all over the kitchen, he to get free to kill me, I to keep him from shooting. Once the gun went off—a wild shot that landed somewhere near the kitchen sink."

"I know," Nem nodded.

"Then we were in a clinch, and the damn thing went off again. I was forcing Pete's hand up. The bullet went through his temple—awful! But I've got no way to prove that was what happened. Mrs. Shattuck heard me threatening earlier in the day to pump him full of lead if he didn't play the man, treat Dolly decently. I—well, I went mad with fear and horror, I suppose, when I saw him crumpled up at my feet, dead."

"So you thought of getting out of it altogether by burning Pete, who was your size and build, after you'd changed clothes, so that every one'd think it was you who had been killed. The alarm would go out for Pete. No one would be looking for you."

"Exactly. But let me finish," begged Terry. "I—I did all that—fired the barn. Then I thought of Dolly's fear and suspense. I hid in her cellar until everyone

had gone, after the fire, and told her what I'd done. You know how she's stuck by me. You won't try to hold her as my accomplice?"

It was an agonized plea.

Nem looked up, round blue eyes blinking wistfully.

"No, I can't see how Dolly ought to be caught up in this."

"Then—then—" Terry Crawn rose, flung back his head. "I'm ready to go with you!"

Nem heaved himself to his feet, frowning.

"Hmm." Terry, you know that I'm the only living soul that knows you aren't resting nice and quiet over in the Hillside Cemetery? They put up an awful nice tombstone to you—real artistic."

His voice trailed away.

"I kind of hate to go back and waste all that granite and carving."

Terry Crawn stared at him in completest puzzlement.

"You—what?"

But Dolly Sorel understood. A glad little cry burst from her pale lips. She seized Nem Parsons' big hand in both her own.

"I was just thinking," he ruminated. "S'posing no one else ever did know what

really happened. Best thing for you to do, Mr. John Smith, would be to strike out for some western place—Canada, maybe. You're a good farmer. It wouldn't take you long to establish yourself in some decent, God-fearing community and make a home, and then—remember, I'm just figuring things out, as they'd be if I hadn't happened in on this—I suppose Dolly here would decide in time to leave Bridgehaven, get a divorce from that fugitive, murdering husband of hers—and maybe settle out West too. Later on, she'd marry a nice young farmer and sort of lose herself."

Terry groaned.

"I'd planned just that."

Nem smiled and turned to the green baize door, napkin over his arm.

"Try it, Terry. I guess I'm getting old, and careless, maybe. I came on to Boston to pick up Pete Sorel's trail—but he's slipped right out of my hands. Guess Chief O'Malley'll be kind of sore at my losing my man. But it won't do any harm for once."

"Do you mean—"

Nem was at the door, a broad smile on his cherubic face.

"So long, Mr. Smith—good luck to you and that farm of yours out West." ♦ ♦ ♦

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FATHER, MAY I GO OUT to KILL?

By

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

CHAPTER ONE

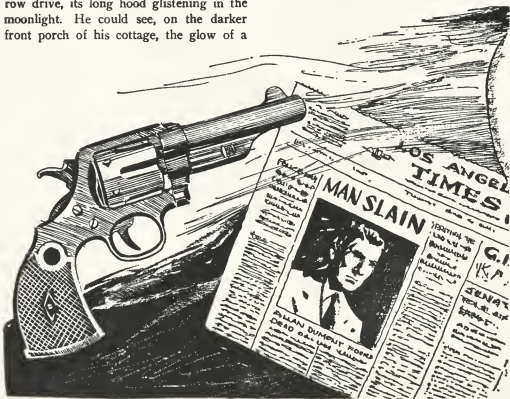
Case of the Friendly Gal

JEFF came up from the beach about nine that evening. He'd had a full afternoon in the sun and the salt water. He felt almost human again. Then, as he came shoulder high to the last step, he saw the Mercedes.

It was parked on the gravel of his narrow drive, its long hood glistening in the moonlight. He could see, on the darker front porch of his cottage, the glow of a

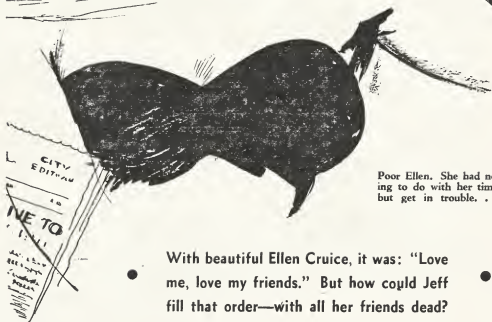
cigar. He could almost smell the imported Havana tobacco.

He stood there for seconds, only his head and shoulders visible above the top step, resentment boiling in him. Damn it, Cruice didn't own him; he had no loyalty to him, nor reason for any.





Poor Ellen. She had nothing to do with her time—but get in trouble. . . .



With beautiful Ellen Cruice, it was: "Love me, love my friends." But how could Jeff fill that order—with all her friends dead?

He came across his small patch of lawn, noting that Cruice was sitting on the chaise lounge, not stretched out, but with his usually erect back slouched forward. That was a concession for him.

Jeff came up on the porch, and Richard Cruice said, "I'll bet you were annoyed at seeing my car."

He was a thin and elegant man with a pleasantly modulated voice. He'd always had money. Since he was born, he'd lived the good life.

"Drink?" Jeff asked.

"No, thanks. You *are* annoyed, aren't you? When you don't answer a question, even an implied question, it's because you don't want to lie. You're an amazing man, Jeff Harder."

"Amazing? How?"

"You're honest. I'd wager you're almost completely honest. In your business, that's practically sacrilege."

"You've had a lot of experience with private operatives, Mr. Cruice. There must have been some good ones in the lot." Jeff slopped some bourbon in a tumbler and added soda. He sat down in the wicker chair near the steps and looked out at the distant water.

"Nice place you have," Cruice said. "You do all right, don't you?"

"I bought the lot a long time ago," Jeff said. "I built the cottage myself. I'm—well, lower middle class, Mr. Cruice."

"You make a very fine daily wage, Jeff."

"When I work."

"And you only work when you need to, don't you?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No. You know they don't. But I didn't come up here to pass the time of day. I don't know what we're sparring for."

"What has she done, now?" Jeff asked abruptly.

"Nothing. She never really does anything long enough for it to become a vice, does she? She's a dabbler, a dilettante. She hasn't done anything, Jeff, but she's

restless. Lord knows what she'll cook up."

THEY were speaking of Ellen Cruice, his daughter. An only child and motherless, a girl with light brown hair and grey-green eyes and a slim, young figure. A beautiful girl, and pampered.

"Have you thought of one of the larger agencies?" Jeff said. "They're honest and capable, and enjoy remarkable police cooperation. Why me?"

"You're saying 'no'? You're turning me down, Jeff?" The voice was quiet, almost pleading, and it wasn't like Richard Cruice to plead for anything.

Jeff said uncomfortably, "You overrate me, Mr. Cruice."

"Maybe. Don't I pay enough, Jeff?"

"You pay what everyone pays."

"It is unpleasant work?"

"I've had worse."

Now the voice was almost a whisper. "Then why, Jeff? You're not in love with her, are you? It's not that?"

Jeff stared at him in the dimness. "Lord, no! If I loved her, wouldn't I jump at the job?"

"Not you. Because you're honest. And proud. And you have a genuine dignity. Why should you turn me down, if it isn't that?"

"I haven't turned you down. I'll . . ." Jeff took a deep breath. "When and what?"

"It's not that definite. She has ideas she'd like to go into business. A book store, for one thing. A camera shop. She hasn't decided, definitely. But the damndest people have been hanging around the house. She changes her friends as often as she changes her shoes. I guess you know that. These new friends look a little too chrome plated, for my taste."

"I'll drop in tomorrow morning," Jeff stalled. He finished his drink. "Anyone in particular you distrust?"

Richard Cruice stood up. "Just one, so far. A lad named Walter Dumont. A carry-over from her little-theater period. He's

the one who's promoting the book-store idea."

"His ideas and Ellen's money." Jeff shook his head. "Her money should be in trust."

"I know. But she's over twenty-one, and it was left to her by her grandmother. I'll see you in the morning, then, Jeff?"

"I'll be there." Jeff stood up and watched Cruice climb into the Mercedes.

He watched its lights disappear down the gravel road, and reached for his glass again. He hesitated only a few seconds before refilling it.

She wasn't in any sense the standard spoiled-daughter-of-the-rich type. She was alert and basically sound and perceptive. She had too much time and money and no interest in social affairs or social position. She seemed to be a magnet for every angle-shooter she met. And she'd met plenty.

Jeff put his feet up on the railing and his mind into low gear. It was a job. It made the cottage possible. It filled his belly. It was less degrading than divorce work and more remunerative than night watchman. Why did he shun it?

"You're not in love with her, are you? It's not that?"

He should have said, "Of course. I fall in love with every good-looking, wealthy girl I meet. They make such ideal wives." He should have told Cruice he was on his way to Patagonia.

But he hadn't.

Cruice thought he was honest and proud; Cruice had no fears about his play for Ellen. And Cruice paid promptly and without complaint.

He had one more drink before hitting the hay. He had one more walk on the beach before driving into town next morning. He took the coast road all the way, cutting off on Olympic.

The Cruice home was in Cheviot Hills, a dignified, colonial showplace looking incongruous in its setting of royal palms.

The Japanese butler who opened the

door said, "Good morning, Mr. Harder. Are you going back on the payroll?"

"Think so, Ray. Miss Cruice up yet?"

"Not yet, not for two hours yet."

"Then you'd better not say anything about my being here, not to her. Mr. Cruice in his study?"

Ray nodded. "I'll say nothing to Miss Ellen."

Cruice was wearing a brown Harris tweed Jeff coveted the moment he saw it. A built-in record player was almost inaudibly giving out with a Brahms concerto, and Cruice's head reposed against the high back of his chair. There were some papers on his desk. He rose.

"Good morning, Jeff," he said. "Lovely morning. I've some names and addresses here." He handed the papers across to Jeff.

"And if they're all bums, what then? Ellen wouldn't care. It wouldn't change her interest in them one bit."

Cruice's smile was dry. "I'd like to know. Maybe they're all worthwhile people. If they aren't, I'd like to be prepared. Is this going to be last night, all over again?"

"I hate to think I'm wasting your money."

"You're not. But that reminds me. I made out a check, as a retainer." He opened a drawer in the desk, found the check and handed it over.

It was for five hundred dollars.

Jeff said, "It won't be anything like that. It's just a—well, just a credit report you want, really."

"A bit more than that. Call it a 'Harder Report.' You'll find me here most of the time, Jeff."

"All right. It will take a day or two. I'll keep in touch."

HE HAD no office in town. He rented a motel room in the Palisades, parked his luggage and drove down to the credit bureau.

Mrs. Retzer said, "Dick Tracy. I

thought you'd be retired by this time."

"So did I. But I discovered it takes money. How much time on these?"

"I'll do what I can to hurry them. But with all this housing going on, we're getting a trillion requests. Any of them more important than the others?"

"That Dumont would be. And Harry Volper. I wonder if he's the . . ." He shrugged. "You know."

"I know. But he's never been convicted of anything if he is." She shuffled through the papers and looked up. "Miss Cruice again?"

"Now . . ." Jeff said. "Nosey, nosey."

"That's my business," she answered. "Where can I phone you?"

"You can't. I'll phone you. I'd appreciate any extra effort. Time is of the essence." He put a ten-dollar bill on her desk.

"Mr. Harder," she said in mock shock. "You know we don't—"

"Some posies for your hair," Jeff said. "I meant to send you some, and forgot. I know too much to expect to—to *buy* you."

"You don't know too much if you think that's impossible," she answered. "Phone me tomorrow."

He went out, wondering if he should look up Dumont. He'd met him, at the Cruice home, some months ago. But Dumont wouldn't be so dumb as to misread a visit from a private detective. Jeff decided, instead, to go over to headquarters.

For four years he'd worked under Captain Tinian in the homicide section, and it had been a mutually agreeable relationship.

The captain was just leaving.

"Going home for an early lunch," he said. "Come on along. We haven't had a chin for months. Where have you been?"

"Working and loafing. Marta will love having you bring home an unexpected guest."

"If it's you, she will. You remind her of Dick."

Dick, their only child, had died in the Philippines.

In the car, Tinian asked, "How's it going?"

"I get by. And with you?"

The captain's eyes were on the traffic. "Trouble, trouble all the time. Been up to the cottage lately?"

"Just came in this morning." Jeff paused.

"I was up there for two weeks."

"Came back for—business?"

"Business. Money, that is."

"Working for Cruice, again, Jeff?"

"That's the second time this morning I've been asked that," Jeff said. "I am probably the most un-private private investigator in town."

"And the only one I'd take home to lunch. Anybody I can help you with, Jeff?"

"Only one you'd have reason to come into contact with. Harry Volper."

The captain had stopped for a light. He looked over at Jeff. "Harry Volper. He hasn't come under my category—yet." The light changed, and his eyes went back to the traffic. "Harry walks a very narrow trail on the thin edge of law. I've met him a couple times. He's never gone in for the heavy stuff that I know of, and even the confidence raps they tried to pin on him wouldn't stick. Sharp, Jeff."

"And handsome."

"Well, if you care for the type. A little too oily for my taste."

Marta was glad to see him. "We've missed you," she told him. "Why do you hide up at that cottage all the time?"

"I could guess," the captain said.

Jeff stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The captain's smile was directed at Marta. "Official business, but you should see her."

"No," Jeff said. "Nothing like that. Not for me."

"That," the captain said, "is exactly the way I was talking three weeks before the wedding."

They were halfway through the meal when the phone rang. The captain went to answer it.

When he came back, he stood for a moment in the archway to the living room, staring at Jeff. "Are you psychic, Jeff? Or were you pulling my leg, by any chance?"

"What happened?"

"Harry Volper has been killed. Murdered."

Marta said, "You'll finish your meal first, Bert Tinian."

"Just the coffee." He came over to the table. "Come along, Jeff?"

"Like to." Jeff swallowed his coffee and stood up. "Where'd it happen?"

"At his home. That's where we're going."

In the car, Jeff said, "Gang stuff?"

Tinian didn't look at him. "I wouldn't guess. Had he been bothering Miss Cruice, Jeff?"

"Not that I know of. He's been hanging around the house, and Mr. Cruice wants all Ellen's friends checked."

"I know. A good psychiatrist should check him, too. You'd think she was seven years old the way he watches her. Likes to throw his weight around, doesn't he?"

Jeff smiled. "Around headquarters?"

"Used to. Used to think we could throw everybody in the clink who smiled at her. By the way, where was he this morning?"

"Captain," Jeff said, "you don't mean that."

The captain still was watching the traffic. "You put a lot of faith in coincidence, don't you? Jeff, you were asking about him an hour ago, and now—"

"And now you'd like to pin it on Cruice because you don't like him. Let's get the story first."

CHAPTER TWO

Playing With Murder

HARRY VOLPER still lay on the floor of his bedroom, a hole where his left eye should have been. The technical men were already there, and the M. E.

The M. E. said, "Died instantly, of course. '32, they tell me. His wife's in her room, in shock. Must have happened last night."

A detective sergeant came over and said, "The housekeeper found him. Want to talk to her. Captain?"

"Later. Got the slug?"

The sergeant nodded. "In fair shape, too. Mrs. Volper was out until late last night, she says, and they didn't know anything was wrong until the housekeeper came in here to make the beds, around noon. He never sleeps that late, so they figured he might have gone out earlier, or didn't come home last night. She's the one who phoned, the housekeeper."

Harry Volper was fully dressed, and the remaining eye was gazing impersonally at the ceiling. He was an olive-skinned man, compactly built, with short, dark hair, and handsome.

His now slack face showed some beard, and there was a protruding bruise over his temple.

"Slugged, and then shot," the captain guessed. "Who was Mrs. Volper out with—late last night?"

"She wasn't very coherent," the sergeant said. "Some kind of a party. The M. E. didn't think she should be questioned too much right now."

"You've really nothing, then?"

"Not much, no. Oh, yeah, one thing. She mentioned an Ellen Cruice. That's the only name I got."

Captain Tinian looked at Jeff.

Jeff looked at the floor, at the sergeant, at the M.E. and at the body of Harry Volper, now being hoisted to a stretcher.

"First," the captain said quietly, "it was a coincidence and then a hunch. And now it's getting to be a little more than a hunch. Let's go over there, Jeff, over to the Cruice house."

They had no dialogue on the way over. There was a certain formality in the captain's manner.

The Mercedes was on the drive, with Ellen's M.G. parked behind it.

It was Ellen who answered the door. She smiled at Jeff and then her eyes went inquiringly to the captain.

"Captain Tinian of Homicide," Jeff said.

"I know," Ellen said, "but . . ." It was the start of an unfinished question.

"Checking the movements of Mrs. Volper last night," Jeff went on.

Captain Tinian's voice was dry. "I'll ask the questions, if you don't mind, Jeff."

They went into the high-ceilinged living room. Jeff sat down; the captain and Ellen remained standing.

The captain said, "I understand, Miss Cruice, you were at a party with Mrs. Volper last evening?"

"I was at a party where she was. I wasn't *with* her. Has something happened to Mrs. Volper?"

"Something's happened to her husband. He's been murdered."

Under her tan, Ellen was suddenly pale, and she seemed to sway. "Harry Volper murdered?"

Jeff rose and took a step toward her, but she regained her composure in a moment.

From the hall doorway, Richard Cruice said, "What's happened, Jeff?" He looked at Tinian and back at Jeff. "Why is he here?"

Tinian answered before Jeff could. "I'm checking the death of Harry Volper, Mr. Cruice. I understood from one of the Volpers' servants that Miss Cruice was with Mrs. Volper last evening. It seems, from Miss Cruice's appearance, that she may have been a better friend of Harry's."

The thin face of Richard Cruice was concrete. "That was vulgar and impertinent, Captain. I demand respect in this house, and particularly from a public servant."

JEFF sat down again. Ellen looked at her dad and then at the captain. The captain said quietly, "I'm neither vulgar nor impertinent, Mr. Cruice. In a murder

case, I can't afford to overlook anything."

Ellen said, "I knew Mrs. Volper only slightly. Harry was a friend of mine, a good friend. I can't believe anyone would want to hurt him."

The captain's questioning was brief and to the point. When he'd finished, he turned toward Jeff.

Jeff said, "I'll stay for a while, Captain. I'll pick up my car later."

The captain left, and there was a silence. In a big chair near the front windows Richard Cruice sat wearily staring out. Ellen was smoking, sitting forward on a love seat.

Jeff's voice was impatient. "What don't I know?"

Richard Cruice turned from the window to stare at him. Ellen stiffened, not looking his way.

Cruice said, "What do you mean by that, Jeff?"

"I know the captain pretty well. He wouldn't come up here without cause."

"I'm sure I don't know why he came," Cruice said evenly. "He—"

Ellen said, "Oh, Dad, I know. Jeff's right. There are some things he doesn't know." She turned to face Jeff. "Harry Volper wanted to divorce his wife and marry me. Last night, at the party, his wife made a scene. I don't doubt the captain's heard of it."

"Not while I was with him," Jeff said. "Unless it was told to him over the phone. What about Mrs. Volper? What time did she get home?"

"I don't know. She was still there at midnight, drunk."

"Harry wasn't there?"

She shook her head. "He knew his wife was going. He didn't want me to go. I think he guessed there'd be a scene. I promised him I wouldn't go. Later, I changed my mind."

"Ellen, Ellen . . ." her father said weakly. "It's not necessary to drag all the—"

"I'm not ashamed," she said. "I've noth-

ing to hide. I've done nothing wrong."

"I think we could all use a drink," Cruice said. He went over to a liquor cabinet.

Jeff said to Ellen, "Who'd you go to the party with last night?"

"Walter Dumont."

"And where was it?"

"At Walt's apartment."

"The same place, on Hawthorn?"

She nodded. "You're not going to bother my friends again, are you, Jeff?"

"I'll try not to be a bother."

She turned. "Father, I won't have it."

He was mixing a drink, and he didn't turn.

She gazed for a moment at his unmoving back, and left the room.

CRUICE brought over Jeff's drink. Cruice's eyes were bleak.

Jeff said, "Thanks," and then, "She's no child, you know. She's no . . . nitwit."

"She's a product of the restless times," Cruice said. "Jeff, for the first time in my life I'm really scared. Some kind of—of calamity is shaping up. I feel it."

Outside, the little M.G. speedster barked into life. There was the rattle of spurting gravel.

Cruice shook his head. Jeff gulped his drink and said, "I'll be getting along." He thought of some more advice, but decided not to voice it. Who was he to advise Richard Cruice?

He took a cab back to the Merc, and headed for Franklyn.

The M.G. was parked on Hawthorn, in front of a two-story, four-apartment building of grape-colored stucco. It was an undistinguished place, but must have enjoyed a spectacular view of the night lights.

Walter Dumont's apartment was on the second floor. He was a lad of many talents and no achievement; his latest pitch had been photography, and now there was this book-store dream.

He opened the door almost immediately to Jeff's ring.

He was fairly tall, and impressively broad. By any standards other than the local, he needed a haircut. His face was full and masculine.

"Yes?" he said.

"Jeff Harder's the name. Checking on the murder of a man named Volper, Harry Volper. Know him?"

"I knew him. You have some official title, Mr. Harper?"

"Harder," Jeff corrected him. "Let's not be coy. I suppose Miss Cruice warned you against me."

"I'm rather busy, Mr. Harder. What is it you want?"

"I don't want to stand here in the hall and talk to you. I assure you, Dumont, that the pain you give me approximates the locality and the degree of the pain I probably give you. Why don't we go inside and pretend we're civilized?"

There was a pause while Dumont glared belligerently.

Then, from behind the door, Ellen's voice said, "You may as well invite him in, Walt. He's very resourceful."

Dumont held the door wide, and Jeff entered.

It was a big living room, furnished in Chinese modern. Ellen sat on a mammoth chartreuse davenport, a drink in her hand. Jeff went over to sit on the other end of it.

Jeff said, "Captain Tinian seems determined to involve Miss Cruice in this business. I'm sure we all want to avoid that."

Dumont looked at her, and she looked at Jeff.

Ellen said, "You're not serious. The captain doesn't think I killed Harry Volper."

"You're going to be involved in it. The papers like names and expensive addresses. You have both."

"You can't keep her out of the papers," Dumont said, "and the police can't arrest her for something she didn't do."

"There's a possibility they can't convict her, but they can arrest her." Jeff turned

to Ellen. "What time did you get home last night?"

"About three."

"And before that?"

"We were here until two. Then Walt and I took a drive."

"And Mrs. Volper left when?"

Dumont answered for her. "About one-thirty. She left with Jack Contrani. He's a friend of Harry's."

"They don't know yet," Jeff said, "when Volper was killed. They will, after they find out what time he ate. But if Mrs. Volper went right home, the chances are Harry was dead then. I can't see anyone taking the chance of a gun, unless he was home alone. Of course, the housekeeper . . . I never thought of her."

"You're assuming Mrs. Volper didn't kill him? I suppose the police are assuming the same?" Dumont's voice was sarcastic.

"The police, you can bet, will check Mrs. Volper very thoroughly. Right now, I'm more concerned with clearing Ellen."

"Thank you," she said mockingly.

"Contrani," Jeff went on steadily, "has never been convicted of murder, but that's because he can afford expensive lawyers. Nice playmates you children have."

Ellen flinched, and the empty glass in her hand was unsteady. She leaned forward to put it on the coffee table.

"I've known Jack a long time," Dumont said. "He's a gambler, no more than that. The rest is just police persecution."

"That sounds all right from a soapbox," Jeff chided him. "But you're talking to adults now, Dumont." He looked at Ellen. "At least, I hope you are."

She looked at Jeff defiantly.

He went on equally. "Contrani is probably getting the grilling of his life right now. Out with the dead man's wife, and a man with his record . . . We won't worry about him, for a while."

There was the sound of a door chime.

It was the damndest day for coincidences. Dumont went to the door, and when

he came back Jack Contrani was with him.

HE WAS short and stocky and fancied himself as a rough customer. He inclined his head toward Jeff and asked Dumont, "Buddy of yours?"

"No."

"Didn't figure he would be. Private op, ain't he?"

"You read too many comic books, shorty." Jeff told him. "How come you're a free man?"

"And lippy, too," Contrani said. "Why shouldn't I be free, snoopy?"

"Considering you were out with Harry Volper's wife last night, and Harry's now dead Considering—"

But Contrani interrupted him. "Harry's dead? Harry Volper? What . . ." He stared from one to the other.

"Shot," Jeff said. "Murdered. Some time last night or this morning. The call should be out for you, shorty."

Contrani's face was as nasty as his voice. "Cut out the 'shorty', Harder. What happened to Harry? How'd it happen?"

Jeff stood up. "I don't know. You could phone headquarters."

"Sit down," Contrani said. "You're not going anywhere."

Jeff started to chuckle. Contrani took a tentative step his way. Dumont seemed to be holding his breath.

It was Ellen who broke the tension. She said, "Jeff has to leave, Jack. He's taking me home. I only brought my car over for Walt to use."

"He's a friend of yours, baby?"

"He's a friend of mine."

"Okay, shamus. You're lucky."

Jeff nodded. "I sure am. Boy, you had me scared for a while." He started to chuckle again.

Ellen said, "We're late now, Jeff. We must hurry."

In the hall, she was silent. All the way to his car, she was silent. Then, as he pulled away from the curb, she took a deep breath.

"You're an awful fool," she said. "You tell me he's a killer, and then—"

"That he is, but I didn't tell you he was tough, which he isn't. Some day, you and I will watch the Rams play. Now there's a gang that's really tough. And not a knife or gun in the bunch."

"Oh," she said. "You—you—"

"Lady," he said, "don't expect your friends to impress me. I've seen too many of them. I've seen them in line-ups and bread lines and ticket lines for the smart shows. I've sent more men like Contrani to the clink than you'll ever meet. Did you really bring your cat over for Dumont to use?"

She nodded. "Walt's all right, Jeff. He has simply . . . loads of ability. He just never got a break."

"He'll get as many breaks as he can find rich women to give them to him. You don't even believe in him yourself. It's another world, for you, and interesting for a while."

"Maybe. Maybe. I'm starving, aren't you?"

He took his eyes from the traffic for a moment. "You'll be home in . . . Okay."

"You can always put it on the expense account," she said.

"This one's on me," he said, and turned into a drive-in. "That is, if a hamburger's enough for your delicate palate."

"I love it," she said. "I could live on it. I'd make a fine wife for a poor man."

He had no response to that.

At home, she said, "Aren't you going to stop for a drink?"

He shook his head. "Not this time. There are some people I want to see first."

"All right," she said. "A girl can be only so forward."

As he drove off, he reflected that it hadn't taken long for the shock to wear off, the shock she'd shown at the death of Harry Volper. He couldn't have meant much to her.

He headed for the Volper residence.

The housekeeper answered his ring. She

was a heavy woman with a sour, suspicious face. "Another reporter?" she asked.

"No. My name is Jeff Harder. You can tell her I'm a friend of Ellen Cruice's."

If anything would bring results, Jeff thought, that statement should.

The housekeeper was back in two minutes. "This way, please," she said. She was smiling, though not prettily.

She led him through a cork-floored entry hall, through the low, beamed living room, into a dinette whose entire north wall was sliding-glass doors. Two of them were open.

There was a straw blonde sitting in a rattan easy chair near one of the open doors. On the glass-and-rattan coffee table in front of her, there was a half-filled bottle of inexpensive bourbon.

HER face was bold and promising; her figure indicated it could deliver what the face promised. At the moment she was scowling.

"Who the hell are you?" she wanted to know.

"I identified myself to your housekeeper. I'm a private operative, Mrs. Volper."

"And a friend of Ellen Cruice's? What's she done now?"

"Nothing, I hope. I don't like to bother you at a time like this, but—"

"Time like *what*? He was ready to throw me out, anyway. Am I supposed to go shopping for black?"

"I don't think Ellen meant to marry him," Jeff said. "It was mostly his idea, I'm sure." He paused. "Mr. Volper seemed to have a marrying complex."

"I had him for four years. And we went around for a couple years before that, while he was still tied to number three. What's really on your mind, Philo? Not just gassing with me, I'm betting."

Jeff said quietly, "I thought there might be something you'd tell me that you wouldn't tell the police."

She shook her head, and poured another drink of whiskey. "You *really* did? You



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DETECTIVE TALES

thought you could come in here as a friend of that Cruise dame's, and expect something from me?"

"We'll call it a bad guess, then." Jeff shrugged. "A man can try. Thanks for not throwing me out, anyway." He turned.

Her voice was casual. "Have the boys in blue any ideas on it?"

"Some, I guess." He paused, studying her. "They don't tell me their troubles or listen to mine. I'd stay as clear-headed as possible, if I were you."

She put her glass down and looked at him curiously. "Are you trying to tell me something? Don't tell me they think I..." She didn't finish.

"It was just general advice. I don't know what they think." He smiled, and started back through the living room.

He was almost to the entry hall when she said, "Wait—will you?"

He turned to face her. He said nothing. "I—I'm getting the creeps, around here. Which way are you going?"

"West. To the Palisades."

"On Sunset? Through Hollywood?"

"I could go that way. It's the long way, but for a friend of Miss Cruise's..." He grinned at her.

"Sit here and get soused," she said, "while I retrace my makeup."

"I'll wait," he said.

He sat in the dim living room, looking out at the traffic, reconsidering the day, finding no cracks, no incongruities strong enough to give him an angle.

From the entry hall, Mrs. Volper said, "I'm ready."

In the dimness, she had for a moment the illusion of youth and freshness. Her voice had been quiet, and her hair wasn't so bad without a direct light on it. He wondered what she'd looked like before she'd met Harry Volper.

It was slow going in the home-bound traffic. There was no dialogue.

(Continued on page 104)



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Mr. Clarence Bush, New York	\$41.24 first week	Mrs. Fred Pillath, Jr., Wis.	\$41.82 first week
Mr. Ralph Sherrer, Ky.	\$67.11 first week	Mrs. Morton Hoona, Ga.	\$48.92 first week
Mr. Heracio de LaRoche, Cal.	\$68.84 first week	Mrs. Hazel McClean, Ill.	\$40.35 first week
Mr. Boyd Shaw, Tenn.	\$53.46 first week	Mrs. Pearl Elbern, Minn.	\$63.87 first week
Mr. W. F. Gardner, N. C.	\$63.49 first week	Mrs. Pete Dinkus, Ohio	\$61.32 first week



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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 102)

He dropped her on Sunset and Cherokee, only a few blocks south of Dumont's place.

"I can get a cab from here," she said.

He smiled. "You can walk it, from here. Give my love to Dumont."

"You're so clever," she said. "Thanks for the ride."

CHAPTER FOUR

One More for the Morgue

AT HIS motel, he took a shower and changed his clothes. Then, after phoning Cruice, he walked down to the beach. He hadn't achieved much but mileage today. The memory of Ellen's gray-green eyes and mocking voice came to him, and he banished it.

His mind went back to last night, and worked forward from there. He thought of Captain Tinian, and went back to the motel to phone.

He caught him at home, and asked, "When did Volper die? Have you found out yet?"

"Between eleven-thirty and midnight. It's all we have got, besides Jack Contrani, and he's not talking. Though he's whimpering a little." A silence. "What have you got, Jeff?"

"Nothing but a big gasoline bill. I'll keep in touch with you, Captain."

"You do that." A pause. "Your first loyalty, you know, is to us. Your clients pay your way, but we okay your license."

"Sure. Thanks for the lunch." He hung up.

At seven-thirty, Jeff was back at the Cruices'.

Ellen opened the door. "I'm ready," she said.

"Ready for what?"

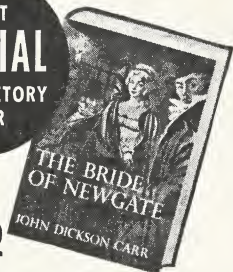
"For you. Let's not fool ourselves, Jeff. Where are we going?"

(Continued on page 106)



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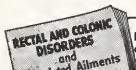
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106

DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 104)

She was smiling up at him, and she looked about eighteen. He held himself sternly in check.

"Even a movie would be all right," she said humbly. "I'm not expensive."

"I have to see your dad first," he said.

"He's not home. There was trouble at the ranch, and he had to go out there."

"All right," Jeff said wearily, "a movie. I'm getting paid for it."

"You're lucky I'm not sensitive. I'll get my coat."

The movie was bad, and they walked out in the middle of the first feature. They drove out the Ocean Highway to The Ledge, a quiet spot with a glass-walled porch overlooking the water.

She had a sandwich, and he had a drink. Then they had a pair of drinks.

She said, "It was too bad about Harry. Do you think I had anything to do with that?"

"How do you mean?"

"Stirring up something? With his wife. Or that awful little Jack Contrani?"

"I don't know. What can you see in a man like Harry Volper?"

"What I'm seeing now."

He frowned, staring at her wonderingly.

"You," she said. "I knew if I let Dad think I was getting involved with people like that, he'd send for you again. And he did. And here we sit, sweet and cozy."

"Oh, Ellen, what's to be gained by—"

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing, I see now. You'll pardon my brass. I'd hate to think, though, that my whim might have been—might have caused Harry's . . ." She paused. "I'm not that—that frivolous."

"I know you aren't," he said. "You're a fine girl. You're smart and beautiful and sensitive." He paused. "And rich."

"Is that it, my money? Is that why? I'd like to think that's the only reason, Jeff."

"That's eighty percent of it. The rest is my—oh, I don't know. I like to be alone."

FATHER, MAY I GO OUT TO KILL?

"You love me, though?" Her voice was a whisper. "It is true, what I thought? You do love me, Jeff Harder."

He nodded.

"That's enough for now," she said. "We won't rush it. I can be patient."

"Ellen, please don't be so damned humble. You're embarrassing me." His voice was ragged.

"All right." She smiled. "We'll talk about the Cubs, or Hemingway. Or even Debussy, if you want. What do you like to talk about, Jeff?"

"About you. Why and when you decided this new love was the big one. And how long you think it will last."

"Forever," she said. "It will last forever. Do you think Di Maggio's washed up?"

THEY talked of that, and the Rams, of the city's phenomenal growth and was it god or bad? Of Truman and McCarthy and Marquand and Bergman. They never got to Debussy at all, nor back to what was really in their minds.

About eleven-thirty, they went out to the car in the parking lot, and Jeff went around to open the door on her side.

She didn't get in. She stood there, looking up at him, and there was a full moon highlighting the beautiful hair and the expressive eyes.

His self-discipline wasn't that good.

Her body was pliantly firm and her mouth soft and unrelenting.

He knew he'd never forget this moment.

There were no words as they drove home. There was no particular need of words—and nothing they could solve.

When he walked with her to the door, she said, "I won't kiss you again, not tonight. You're a big boy now, and I want the future to be your decision. I want a mental decision, not a physical one."

He nodded. "I'd have to change an awful lot of my thinking. I think I'm going to have to."



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DETECTIVE TALES

Back at the motel, he couldn't sleep. He dressed after a while and went down to the beach. It was chilly and damp, and helped not a bit.

Around three-thirty, fatigue took over, and he fell asleep.

He ate breakfast at the inn across the road. It was ten-thirty and the morning's clarity had arrived. The breakfast was perfect, and from the window at his elbow, he could see the ocean.

From the inn, he phoned Mrs. Retzer at the Bureau.

"It was a cinch," she said. "All remarkably solvent. Their credit I should have."

He went back for another cup of coffee. He was sitting there when the *Times* driver brought in the load of late editions.

The picture of Walter Dumont was prominent on the front page. It flattered him, and was probably a studio job by a first-rate man. Walter Dumont had been killed—with a .32.

Police were checking the whereabouts of Jack Contrani, who'd been released about two hours before Dumont had died. Contrani, it seemed, had disappeared.

A car owned by Miss Ellen Cruice had been parked in front of Dumont's apartment all night, but Dumont hadn't been killed there. He'd died in a cheap hotel on Figueroa.

Jeff phoned headquarters, but Tinian wasn't there. He finally got Sergeant Borken.

"I just wanted to tell the captain that I took Mrs. Volper over to Hollywood around five-thirty last evening. I think she was on her way to Dumont's apartment."

"We know that," Borken said. "We trailed you until you dropped her, and then we tailed her. She's clear, Jeff, almost. On this one, anyway. Anything new with you?"

"Nothing." He paused. "How long did she stay with Dumont?"

"She didn't. He wasn't home, or at least he didn't answer his bell. But with that

FATHER, MAY I GO OUT TO KILL?

M.G. out in front, she probably figured—"

"Miss Cruice lent Dumont that car yesterday afternoon," Jeff said. "That's straight, understand? I took her home from there."

"Don't raise your voice, laddy. I'm not calling you a liar. You running a taxi now, Jeff?"

"No."

"Well, you might be, before long. The captain's awful unhappy about the way you thread through this case."

Jeff put through one more call. Then he climbed into his car and headed for the highway.

He got to the Cruice home just as the captain was leaving. They met on the walk outside.

"Where in the hell have you been?" the captain asked. "I've been looking for you this morning."

"I've been sleeping. I just phoned you at headquarters. I talked to Sergeant Borken."

"You heard about Dumont?"

"I read about it. Is that why you're here, captain?"

"That's why. I've an alibi to check. Miss Cruice claimed you brought her home from Dumont's yesterday. Is that right?"

"That's right. Is that the alibi you were talking about?"

"No. Jeff, if I thought . . ." His voice was heavy.

Jeff said, "No matter what you think, don't go so far as to assume I'd countenance murder. No matter who's involved. You know me better than that, Captain."

"I hope so. I knew my son pretty well, and you're exactly like him. Jeff, boy—don't ever fail me."

"I won't. Have you found Contrani?"

"Not yet. He looks logical, doesn't he, being a gun?"

"I suppose. Yes, he's logical enough."

"All right. I'll see you later. Anything you learn, Jeff, I want to know."

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DETECTIVE TALES

"Of course." He watched the captain climb into his car before walking up to the door. It was open, and Ray stood there.

"Mr. Cruice in his study?" Jeff asked.

The servant nodded. "I guess he'll see you, Mr. Harder."

The record player was again playing softly. Shostakovich, this time, the Philadelphia Orchestra. Symphony Number Five.

RICHARD CRUICE'S head was back against the high chair. He pressed a button on his desk and the music stopped. His eyes were tired.

He said, "Tinian was just here."

Jeff nodded. "I know. Mr. Cruice—Ellen and I are going to get married."

The eyes were no longer tired; they blazed. The thin body was rigid in the big chair, and the sensitive face was frozen ashes.

Cruice's mouth opened, and he was striving painfully to get some words out.

"It was just a trick," Jeff said. "It was a test of your reaction. I didn't come here to tell you that at all. But it proved what I've guessed. You're . . . sick, Mr. Cruice."

"Damn you," Cruice said hoarsely. "Damn you, Jeff. You, of all men, to come at me like that. What have you guessed?"

Jeff said tonelessly. "That you killed Harry Volper, and now Dumont."

Cruice stared at him, again pale.

"Two nights ago you came to me," Jeff said, "and told me about some people you wanted checked. You knew about Harry Volper at the time, how serious he was about Ellen. But you said there was only one you worried about, and that was Dumont. You knew then you were going to kill Volper, didn't you? And knowing it, you couldn't voice his name. And the second killing was easier, after the first. You were better conditioned to murder then."

Cruice had no words. He closed his eyes.

"You're sick," Jeff repeated. "You need treatment, Mr. Cruice."

FATHER, MAY I GO OUT TO KILL?

"Insane? Is that what you're trying to say, Jeff?"

"About Ellen. It wasn't only Volper or Dumont. You don't want *anyone* to marry her. You never did. Is it—are you afraid to be alone? Is that it, Mr. Cruice?"

"You're the crazy one, Jeff."

"Maybe. I phoned the ranch and asked if you were there last night. Your manager told me you had been, but he said it like a man reading a script. Captain Tinian will probably break him down quick enough."

"Will he? They'll never put me away, Jeff. Who'd watch over Ellen, if they put me away? Jeff, for God's sake, what's your gain in this? Why should you say these things to me? Even if they're true, why should you—"

"I work with the law," Jeff said. "I hate murder, no matter who's killed and no matter who kills. It's the act I hate."

"Vermin, both of them. Pornographic pictures, that Dumont was handling. And Volper—that—"

"Human being," Jeff finished for him. "You're not the judge of that, nor am I. You're not God, Mr. Cruice."

He reached slowly for the phone.

THE water was quiet. The sun, coming through the trees above his cottage, laid a pattern of shadowed leaves on the porch. Tinian sat on the chaise lounge, a drink in his hand.

"You can't just sit here and brood, Jeff. He'll go to some mental hospital for a while, and then—well, who knows?"

"I'm not brooding," Jeff said. "I'm waiting."

"Waiting?"

"That's right. For a cloud of dust coming up the road. For an M.G. She didn't talk to me, all the time I stayed in town. She wouldn't even look at me. I'm sure now, how I feel about her. But I don't know how she feels about me. I've got to wait."



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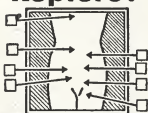
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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 28)

I took a deep and shuddering breath. Then, with both arms pumping, I began a slow walk forward. McGuire's blows were landing freely, but I didn't feel them now. The pink haze was all around me, and in the middle of it a face danced and bobbed, a face that sometimes blended with the haze, but was redder, and could therefore be seen.

The face went away. I stood swaying, waiting for the haze to dissolve.

It was clearing, and from somewhere off to my left, Pug Lester was speaking to me.

"I figured you'd want to do that," Pug Lester said. "I figured you had it coming."

I shook my head, and then I could see the floor. McGuire was lying there, and as I watched him groggily, he rolled over and staggered to his feet.

I brought my hands up, but I knew they wouldn't be any good against the heavy ash tray clutched in McGuire's hand.

McGuire was drawing back for a swing when Pug Lester's gun barrel caught him and sent him down for the count.

"Let me," Pug Lester said. "I get paid, you know—and I like to earn my keep."

I heard myself say, "Thanks Lieutenant," and my voice seemed far away. I found myself thinking of Pug's lonely life, and of the girl who had been a greedy gertie, the one who'd been nobody's doll. She might have made a wife for Pug if things had been some other way.

Pug said, "Hey, boy. You all right?"

I said, "I wonder if she could cook?"

"Golden boy," Pug said, "you look mottled. You're all washed up for the day."

I shook my head and the haze dissolved. "Where's your phone?" I asked Pug. He pointed, and stood by while I dialed Lola Grashin's number. "Gotta tell a girl a story," I said. "Back me up, and I'll buy you a steak."

His mouth had begun to water by the time Lola said hello.

◆ ◆ ◆

NIGHT OF TERROR

(Continued from page 37)

ment the troopers were getting a description of a truck like that, wanted for killing a trooper. Then when you phoned this morning, I *knew* something was wrong. There was something far away and frightened in your voice. Something told me, trouble. I drove like hell. I saw you and the guy come out of the apartment building.



I followed. I got the drift of what was going on, but he was always so close to you and . . . Don't cry any more, please," he said. "It's over now. He's gone."

She held to him, her eyes closed. Gone. Yes, Nick was gone now, she reminded herself. He'd never come back again.

Her mind went back to yesterday. Less than twenty-four hours ago, she and Willy had been fighting. The time between now and then seemed incalculable—as if the world had ended and then begun again.

For a moment, too, she could feel Willy pushing her again, saying to her, "After you, Miss," and then moving between her and the terror of Nick. She would never forget. Nor would things ever be quite as they had been before: a frivolity had passed; a carelessness with time had gone; and Nick, the strange teacher, had taught her something about love.

She put her hands against Willy's cheeks. "I love you," she said, "so much more than ever before." He kissed her. Then he took out his handkerchief and said, "Blow."

She blew, then she smiled at him. "You think of everything." ♦ ♦ ♦

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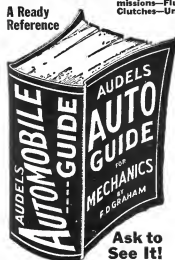
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